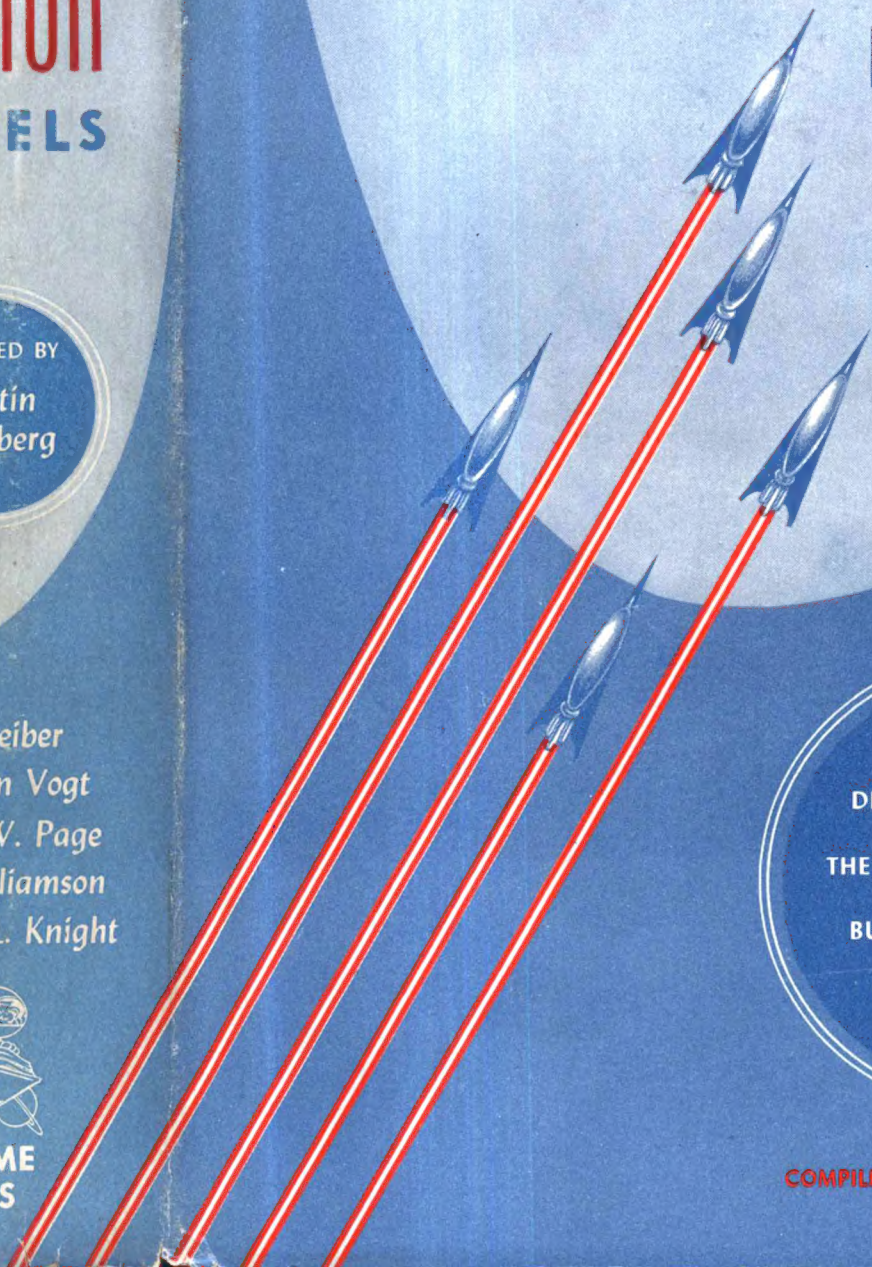
Five SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS

COMPILED BY
Martin Greenberg

Fritz Leiber
A. E. van Vogt
Norvell W. Page
Jack Williamson
Norman L. Knight

GNOME PRESS

Five SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS



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by A. E. van Vogt
DESTINY TIMES THREE
by Fritz Leiber
THE CRUCIBLE OF POWER
by Jack Williamson
BUT WITHOUT HORNS
by Norvell W. Page
CRISIS IN UTOPIA
by Norman L. Knight

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WITH LOVE

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MEN AGAINST THE STARS

JOURNEY TO INFINITY

TRAVELERS OF SPACE

FIVE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS

But without Horns

BY NORVELL W. PAGE

His eyes still on the shouting headlines of the morning newspaper, Walter Kildering drew out a notebook from an inner pocket and flipped the pages rapidly. Those pages were covered with close writing in an even, precise hand. The script was of curious curlicues appended to a horizontal line. There was a knife crease between Kildering's gray eyes as he added two lines of the characters. Afterward, he walked rapidly through the peaceful spring sunlight of Washington; slanted across the street toward the quiet building which housed the Federal Bureau of Investigation headquarters.

It was when he started up the steps that he saw the doors were barricaded with steel armor plate—and guarded by machine guns!

Walter Kildering neither paused nor called out at this discovery. There was no alteration at all in his expressionless face, except that fear crept darkly into his gray eyes. But it was not fear of his own life, for he moved up the steps with the fixed deliberation of an escalator.

Kildering's eyes swept the steel barrier once, and he walked steadily to the panel at the extreme right—the only panel that could be removed readily. Even then, he said nothing, but he masked the fear in his eyes with lowered lids.

Inside, a voice spoke cautiously. "Just a minute, Kildering. Orders are not to let anybody in."

Low-voiced shouts ran along the corridor inside. The echoes came dimly through the steel and Kildering waited outside in the quiet warmth of the spring sunshine—and felt coldness crawl up his spine with the slow cruelty of a dull knife. The newspapers this morning had screamed of two F. B. I. men being murdered in the maternity ward of a hospital in the Middlewestern city of Metropolis; now he found the doors of headquarters barricaded. It all fitted into the pattern of Kildering's deductions—and the conclusion was a hideous thing!

A small breeze wandered through the street, stirring the fresh green of the newborn leaves on sidewalk trees; bringing the scent of rain-wet grass and fertile earth in the parks. Kildering's hand knotted slowly into a white-knuckled fist. He swallowed noisily.

In his brain, he whispered, "For God's sake, *hurry!*" His lips did not move.

When the steel panel was dragged aside to let Kildering enter, he seemed to step through almost casually, but he covered the distance to the elevators with long, efficient strides. The corridor was dim and cold. Pinched bars of sunlight, slanting through the interstices of the armor, seemed lost and vague. Men's whispers made chill echoes—Kildering's feet were silent.

"Third," he said flatly to the elevator operator.

The man had an automatic in his fist. He shook his head as he sent the cage surging upward.

"Can't stop there, Mr. Kildering," he said. "Orders!"

Kildering's eyes closed and he fought the shiver that snaked across his shoulders. His voice was quiet. "Who's on guard there?" he asked. "On the third floor."

"Mayor and Summers, sir."

Kildering's eyes narrowed. They would be hard men to pass—but he had to pass them! When the elevator door had closed behind him, on the second floor, he sprinted toward the general offices. His feet made no sound. He whipped into the offices, crossed with long bounds toward the closed door of Superintendent Overholt's private quarters. A desk interposed, and he hurdled cleanly over it, but so perfect was his bodily co-ordination that he checked cleanly before the door.

"Kildering, sir!" he called. "It's damned important!"

Overholt growled permission and Kildering snapped open the door,

reached the superintendent's desk in a long stride. His voice was suppressed, driving. "I have some deductions to lay before you. They take into account the fact that the building is in a stage of siege—and that the chief believes he is threatened with assassination!"

Overholt was suddenly on his feet, a tall, bushy-haired man with stooped, powerful shoulders. "Who told you about that threat?" he demanded. "No one knows of that. No one except Chief Erricson and me!"

Kildering turned toward the door. "I'll explain on the way to the chief's office," he said. "We have to act quickly to save his life! He is in danger all right—but not from visible assassins!"

"Wait!" Overholt jammed his big fists down on his hips. His blue eyes glittered beneath the overhang of bushy brows, and his voice was metallic, brittle. "What do you mean, invisible assassins?"

Kildering forced himself to speak steadily. "Believe me, sir," he said, "there is no time to lose. I was worried this morning when I saw the news of those two murders in Metropolis. When I found the doors barricaded, I knew my suspicions were right! There is not a minute to spare!"

A heavy frown pulled Overholt's bushy brows down over his eyes. Kildering was the best brain in the service, and a leader in every fiber. Even Overholt, long in command, could feel the pull of Kildering's unconscious accent of command. He set himself solidly.

"Kildering, I can't take you to the chief," he said. "Until he passes the word, not even the president of the United States would be permitted to approach his office!"

"Then we must force his door!"

Overholt came around his desk. "If it were anyone else than you, Kildering," he snapped, "I'd put you under arrest for a madman! What are you talking about?"

Kildering felt a surge of impatience. He could see the truth so clearly himself. And the chief's life was at stake! His words came out like earnest bullets.

"The fact those men of ours were killed in Metropolis means that the chief has attacked the most dangerous criminal ever known," Kildering said crisply. "The same man who robbed six banks in the State of Wichinois of almost three million dollars. You remember what happened to those bankers whom we questioned about the crimes?"

Overholt nodded his big head. "Certainly. Three of them died, of heart failure—"

"That's what they called the murder of our men," Kildering threw in softly.

Overholt frowned and went on: "Three other bankers lost their minds, very fortunately for the bank robber!"

"It wasn't good fortune," Kildering said. "What happened to Police Chief Eidson, of Metropolis, just after he notified us he thought he had a clue to the identity of the robber?"

Overholt jerked a hand impatiently. "Apparently Eidson was already out of his head. Before we could get there, he barricaded himself in his office and killed himself! Crazy as a bat!"

Kildering cried softly: "Don't you see, sir? Every man who attacks this criminal either dies of heart failure or goes crazy! Now, the F. B. I. has attacked him. And the chief has barricaded himself in his office—*as Eidson did just before he killed himself!*"

Overholt jerked out a ragged oath. "You mean this criminal, the one we call the Unknown—"

"I mean, sir"—Kildering's voice was cold with urgency—"that he destroys whoever opposes him, either by death or by insanity! *We must reach the chief at once!*"

For an instant, Overholt's eyes strained wide with the shock of the words. He began an oath that didn't quite come out. Then he shook his head. He smiled, even chuckled a little.

"I can't argue with your logic, Kildering," he said. "As usual, it is faultless. But there's one thing you can't get past. No man can drive another man insane at will—and certainly he can't do it unless he can get through our guard to reach the chief! It just isn't possible. What have you been doing, Kildering, reading ghost stories?"

Kildering took a slow step toward Overholt. His chiseled face was grimly set. His gray eyes held twin fires of desperation. "The bankers were close prisoners when they went mad," he said. "Chief Eidson was alone from the time he phoned us until he was found dead."

Overholt waved a hand, still smiling. "There is some reasonable explanation for it. The chief is safe. When he sends for us—"

"He never will. He'll be dead."

Overholt shugged. "Calm yourself, Kildering. After all, we're hunt-

ing an ordinary criminal, in this Unknown. He's smart, but he isn't a demon, with horns and a forked tail. Just a human being."

Kildering drew in a slow breath. His posture seemed to relax, and he lifted a hand to his forehead. "Then you won't take me to the chief?" he asked dully.

"We'll have to wait!" Overholt insisted irritably.

Kildering stood there, with his hand pressed against his forehead. He was a despairing figure, with a weary droop to his proudly carried shoulders, but his mind was racing furiously. He could not blame Overholt for his failure to understand, to believe what he himself knew to be fact. But he could not allow the fantastic element of the danger to stop him. If the chief died— Kildering's lips twitched. Without the chief, the F. B. I. would lose half its efficiency. It was the skill of the chief's leadership, but more than that, the intense loyalty he inspired in his men which made the F. B. I. the powerful organization it was. And Kildering, like all the other men, respected and loved his chief.

Kildering sighed, and his hand started to drop wearily from his forehead. When it reached the level of his coat lapel, it moved with a speed that blurred the vision—and then was suddenly very steady, very still. It was grinding the muzzle of a heavy automatic into Overholt's body.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Overholt," he said, and his voice had the quiet ring of tempered steel. "We must save the chief! Please walk ahead of me!"

Overholt's cheeks burned an angry red. "Put that gun up, you fool!" he ordered.

Kildering's thumb pressed down the safety catch. In the silence between the two men, the mechanical snap was as ominous as a rattlesnake's whir. "Please go ahead of me," Kildering said again. Each word was chipped from ice.

Overholt stared fixedly into Kildering's eyes through a long unbreathing moment. Overholt swallowed stiffly. He turned on legs as stiff as stilts and stumped out of his office, across the big anteroom and into the corridor toward the third-floor stairway.

Kildering kept pace with Overholt's angry stride. The gun bored into Overholt's spine, and his finger was steady on the trigger—and Kildering's face was sternly drawn. It showed nothing of the terror that rode his soul—not fear for the consequences of his act, nor even

for the death that might well be waiting in the corridor above when he confronted the guards—but fear for the life of his chief!

They went up the steps swiftly—and the third floor was blocked by a sheet of steel armor. Through narrow gunports, two machine guns peered out with uncompromising black muzzles.

"Summers! Mayor!" Kildering's voice lifted quietly to the two men on guard. "Pull aside the shield! The chief's life is in danger!"

The voice that answered was jubilant despite a rasp of strain. "Old Frozen-face Kildering!" the man cried. "I'd like to, Kildering. Swear I would! Can't."

Kildering's lips pulled out, cold against his teeth. Useless to try to persuade Mayor. He had failed with Overholt, much more apt to go against the orders of his chief than was Mayor. Kildering stepped slowly out from behind Overholt, his gun rock-steady against his hip.

"Overholt," he said softly, "tell them this is necessary."

Mayor's voice came to Kildering's ears thinly: "I can't help what the superintendent says. Chief told me to admit no one except by his specific orders! Go back down the steps, or I'll have to open fire. Those are my orders!"

Kildering drew in a slow breath. His eyes were sunken with pain. Mayor and Summers were his particular friends. He had worked with them a score of times. His friends.

"Mayor," Kildering said flatly, "your life and mine are less important than the chief's! If I have to shoot you, I will. And it will have to be a dead shot. I couldn't do anything else through that narrow port!"

Beside him, Overholt gasped, started to turn toward him. Kildering's voice rapped out, with the stern absolute tone of command:

"Summers! Hit Mayor over the head!"

Behind one of the gunports, the light reflection shifted a little. Mayor had turned his head to glance toward his partner! It was the moment for which Kildering had played. His leap was like the release of a tightly compressed spring.

In a single bound, Kildering reached the barrier and sprang high into the air. That first leap cleared the gunport. His hands clamped on top of the shield. The clash of his gun against the metal was harsh, ominous. Kildering's body swung upward, then horizontal—it popped out of sight over the top of the shield. It was as effortless as a bearing turning in a bath of oil!

Mayor and Summers were just beneath him as Kildering dropped. His straining eyes caught the blurred flicker of light as Mayor snatched for his underarm gun! Kildering whipped his feet down, and drove his heels hard into Mayor's shoulders. The blow paralyzed his friend's arms, hammered Mayor downward violently.

Falling, Kildering lashed out with his automatic. The blow was carefully calculated, and thanks to Kildering's superb co-ordination, it struck with exactly the right force. He caught the amazed stare on Summers' boyish face, the shocked bewilderment of the eyes just before the barrel slammed home. It was a flashing glimpse as he drove to the floor with Mayor. But even that was carefully calculated. Kildering's body was tumbling even as Mayor hit the floor. He balled, somersaulted to his feet and pivoted, all in one fluid motion. The gun lashed out again.

Kildering staggered against the wall, but he did not need to inspect the two men, his two friends. He knew they would stay down for a while. But pain fought with anxiety in his eyes as he raced on soundlessly toward the chief's door.

Behind him, he could hear Overholt swearing softly as he climbed, more laboriously, over the steel barrier. He hoped that Overholt would not try to interfere. Kildering drew in a slow breath. He pressed close to the door of the chief's office, and his voice came out easily.

"Chief!" he called. "Chief, it's Kildering! I can save you from John Miller!"

His voice echoed along the hall. Kildering, twisting his head about, listening with hard strain, saw Overholt drop to the floor. He did not check beside the unconscious men, but came toward Kildering, his arms swinging choppily. But he walked on his toes, softly, and Kildering drew in a slow breath of relief. Overholt might not be convinced, but that silent approach meant that, for the present, at least, Overholt woud not attempt to interfere. He blotted the superintendent out of his mind, concentrated on hearing what went on inside the office. There had been no answer to his hail. Fear made the blood throb in his temples. Suppose the chief had already—

"You know me, chief!" Kildering called again, and his voice had a wheedling note. "It's Kildering! Old Frozen-face! I've cracked your toughest cases for you. I can crack this one, too." He checked, listen-

ing. His heart leaped wildly. He thought he had heard the creak of a floor board! "While I'm with you," he called, "John Miller can't hurt you. *I can save you from John Miller!*"

Overholt's brows were drawn down fiercely over his brilliant blue eyes. He stared gloweringly at Walter Kildering. Who was John Miller, Overholt wondered, and why was Kildering talking in that fool tone of voice, as if he would cajole a child? Abruptly, Overholt's eyes whipped toward the chief's door. The chief had answered!

Just on the other side of the barrier, the chief was whispering, as Kildering had whispered, hoarsely.

"How?" asked the chief. *"How can you save me from John Miller?"*

Overholt felt a small coldness tingle over his arms and shoulders, down his thighs. The chief's voice sounded—strange. He glanced at Kildering and almost swore aloud. Old Frozen-face was showing some expression for once. His face was twisted. And there was perspiration beading his forehead.

Kildering whispered, his mouth close to the door. "It's very simple, if you know the secret, chief. I can teach it to you, chief! It took me a long time to learn it, but you have a powerful mind. It will be easy for you! You are a great man. A strong man. You are greater than John Miller!"

Inside, the strange voice whispered back: "I . . . I am greater than John Miller?"

Overholt lifted a hand to his forehead, and the gesture was uncertain. Kildering was looking at him, torture in his eyes.

"Ready!" He formed soundless words with his lips. *"Go in fast!"*

"Certainly," Kildering said aloud, confidently. "You are much greater. You are the chief! Just let Kildering tell you the secret, old Frozen-face Kildering!"

The chief's voice came slowly: "I am greater than John Miller. I am the chief. I—"

The key clicked in the lock, the bolt rasped back. A gun muzzle peered out of the opening, a glittering eye.

"Not you, Overholt!" the chief's voice rasped. "Just Kildering. Good old Frozen-face. He knows the secret. But leave your gun outside, Kildering. How do I know you're not John Miller in disguise? By God, that's it! You're John Miller in disguise, and—"

The gun jerked into line!

An instant before the chief pulled the trigger, Kildering hit the door with his shoulder. He hit it with all the drive of his tensed thighs. The edge of the door caught the chief. It spun him across the room, slammed him against the wall. His arms flew wide with the impact—but he kept hold of the gun!

"You're not going to get me, John Miller!" he screamed. "You're *not* to—"

He pointed the automatic at Kildering and despite his frenzy, the muzzle was steady and unwavering. Overholt poised on the threshold, weighing his chances. His own gun was below in his desk—

The chief was whispering piercingly: "You're not going to get me, John Miller, and—" The chief's eyes were strained painfully wide. The whites showed entirely around the iris. He looked like a sleepwalker. The chief whimpered. "I forgot! I can't shoot John Miller! He's immortal—but I'll beat you, John Miller! I'll beat you!" He laughed, and the sound of it was cracked. *"I'll beat you!"*

He whipped up the automatic and ground the muzzle against his own temple! Overholt uttered a hoarse shout and leaped. He knew it would be too late.

The crash of the gun was deafening. The automatic flew from the chief's hand, thudded against the wall, bounced to the floor. The chief staggered sideways. There was a scratch across his temple, but no gaping hole.

Kildering's voice was the flick of a lash. "Knock him out, Overholt!"

Overholt's bound took him toward the chief. The chief screamed, tried to run. Overholt's fist lashed out with practiced efficiency. It was only when he had caught the chief and eased his unconscious body to the floor gently, that he looked toward Kildering.

Kildering was closing the door. He had his automatic in his fist, and there was a wisp of grease smoke at the muzzle. Kildering stood on widely braced legs. It was as if he had to stand that way, to hold himself erect.

Overholt understood then. He said heavily: "A nice shot, Kildering, knocking the gun out of the chief's hand." He straightened, and his broad shoulders shivered a little. "Good God, you were right! The chief . . . *insane!*"

II

The perspiration still glistened on Walter Kildering's forehead, but there was no other outward sign of perturbation. He felt a slight quivering in the taut cords behind his knees; there was no tremor in his hand as he holstered his automatic.

"That shot will bring men, Mr. Overholt," he said quietly. "They will find Mayor and Summers. We'll have to act quickly if we're to protect the chief's reputation."

Overholt swore, threw up his head in a listening attitude. There were shouts in the distance, and the swift racing beat of men's feet. He nodded. Imperceptibly, and without Overholt actually realizing it, the command had passed from Overholt. He was following Walter Kildering —as all men followed him in moments of stress.

"Right!" Overholt snapped. "Stay here, Kildering. You've got a lot of explaining to do."

Kildering nodded without words, and Overholt strode out, clapped the door shut behind him. Kildering turned toward his chief, walked slowly across to where he lay unconscious. Kildering went down on his knees and began to strap the chief's arms and legs together.

There was pity in Kildering's eyes, but there was anger there, too. It made hot, black flames in the depths of his gray eyes. It made his movements jerky, and the restraint turned his cheeks pale.

Up until the moment he had heard the chief's voice, Kildering had had only logic to guide him. Now he knew that everything he had feared, everything he had deduced in the pure abstraction of his intellect, was damnably true. There was a criminal with a record of incredibly successful thefts, and of equally cold-blooded murder, who could will a strong man like the chief into insanity! And he saw how the trick was being done—an unsolvable dilemma.

The actual phrasing of that thought jerked Kildering rigidly to his feet, sent coldness like a cruelly dull knife along his spine. His hands shook a little as he drew out his notebook and glanced with fierce, demanding eyes at the strangely spidery script which covered its pages. He was standing like that when Overholt returned.

Overholt checked just inside the door, staring at Kildering's stiffly erect back, the challenge of the upflung head, the easy competence of

the shoulders. Overholt felt a brief stir of resentment. He realized then that he had resigned command to this other man, to Walter Kildering. And he recognized that Kildering was competent for the assignment.

Overholt's voice was quiet, and it held a new note of respect. "I've put Mayor and Summers under close arrest," he said curtly. "They won't be allowed to speak, even to their guards. How is the chief?"

Kildering turned slowly. "I think he'll be all right, sir," he said gravely. "I've strapped him up for his own safety. I've also given him a shot of morphine, but it's slow in taking hold. I owe you an explanation, Mr. Overholt."

"Not an explanation, no," Overholt said curtly. "It's quite obvious that you were right, and I am wrong. But, in God's name, Kildering, *tell me what it is we are fighting.*"

Kildering said quietly: "You are more generous than I had any right to expect. I'll be glad to tell you what I know, what I have guessed. It's pitifully little." He opened his notebook, and Overholt frowned at sight of the closely written pages.

"What the hell is that stuff?" he asked curtly. "It can't be code or shorthand."

Kildering shook his head, his face very grave. "No, sir. It's written in Old Icelandic, with Sanskrit characters. I think it would be harder than most codes to decipher, and it's much simpler to read and write."

"Simpler!" Overholt's blue eyes crinkled. It might have been mirth except for the hurt that drew his face gaunt whenever his glance rested on the unconscious chief. "Get on with it—only tell me in English!"

The faces of both men were grim. Kildering's was very pale as he stared at his notes. It had been deduction before, but he knew it now for truth. As long as John Miller remained only a matter of logic, he seemed remote—an abstraction of mathematics, clear enough on paper; insusceptible of material proof. But now he knew—

Kildering's voice bore that weight upon it as he spoke. His voice was like a muted string. "John Miller," he said quietly, "is, of course, the man whom we called the 'Unknown.' He is the man who killed those three bankers and two of our men, who killed Police Chief Eidson by making him commit suicide. He is the one who drove those three other bankers mad before they could give information against him. He has now driven the chief out of his mind by the same process. I have an idea how that is done."

Overholt stared at Kildering. He started to speak and didn't. He crossed slowly to the chief's desk, and dropped into the chair.

"The link of deaths, obviously murder, which are designated as heart failure by the physicians," Kildering resumed, more strongly, "and the induced insanity, join the same criminal who committed these crimes to another curious happening in the city of Metropolis. Three months ago, a woman was found dead in the woods near the city. She was dead of heart failure, and she carried a baby in her arms which the newspapers termed a 'monster.' The scientist who attempted to study this baby went insane and destroyed the monster. Our two men who were killed in Metropolis apparently went to question a woman in the maternity ward of the hospital. Apparently, these two men had hit on the same clue I am following. It was dangerous to John Miller—and he destroyed them."

Overholt's hands were knotted into fists. "I don't know what you're getting at," he said irritably, "but I don't like the sound of it."

"It's not—pleasant," Kildering agreed somberly. "These facts were all I had to go on at first. They hinted at something that I could not bring myself to believe—until those three kidnapings in Wichinois. Even then, the idea seemed so . . . so mad that I could not bring it to your attention until I had confirmation of some sort. I did not think the—conclusive evidence would be so horrible."

Overholt gestured with his fist. "You mean, I suppose, those girls who disappeared in Wichinois—for whom ransom notes were never received. Two of the girls pretty wealthy, another that young prodigy who was president of the State University."

"Yes, sir," Kildering nodded. "After that, you may recall, I asked the bureau to make a check-up on a certain type of statutory offense in Wichinois."

Overholt ran a hand in bewilderment across his forehead. "Yes, I remember. You wanted records of seductions in college towns. Especially where the parents of girls had brought charges against the will of the girl. I didn't know— Good Lord! Did that have something to do with this John Miller?"

Kildering came forward to the desk, and his eyes were very serious. "Mr. Overholt, I am going to ask you a strange thing. I want to request that everything that I say to you here be kept an absolute secret. It must not even be written into reports!"

"Nonsense, Kildering!"

Kildering nodded. "Believe me, sir, this is absolutely necessary. You have seen what John Miller can do. He will tolerate no interference with his plans. He is capable and ready, I am sure, to destroy the entire F. B. I., man by man, leader by leader. The only protection is to keep him from knowing that we suspect his identity!"

Overholt's breath came out in a long gust. It lifted his chest, and there was anger in the flush on his high cheekbones. "You're crazy, Kildering!" he snapped. "I'm going to throw every man in the F. B. I. into this search! No criminal would dare do what you say. Why, damn it, he wouldn't dare!"

On the floor, the chief stirred and whimpered in his throat. *"John Miller!"* he whined. *"Don't let Miller destroy me!"*

Overholt's knotted fists trembled, relaxed. His arms dropped like sticks.

Kildering's voice softened. Pity was in his eyes. "I do not mean that we cannot do anything against Miller, sir," he said. "I only mean that what is done must be accomplished secretly. How he works, I have no idea. So no protection can be contrived against him. Theoretically, psychologists can drive a man insane. They have already accomplished it with lower animals. Presented with an irresolvable dilemma, the mind seeks refuge in insanity. The chief was presented, somehow, with a most primitive and basic dilemma. His will to survive was attacked. He had the alternative of dying or of destroying the threat to his life—John Miller. But he could not destroy the threat, because John Miller is immortal—"

The chief whimpered something indistinguishable and tugged fretfully at his bonds.

Overholt snapped to his feet. His fist pounded the desk. "Damn it, Kildering, tell me who this Miller is!"

Kildering hesitated. His eyes were keen on Overholt's face. "I think I can locate John Miller," he said quietly. "Whether I can then destroy him, I do not know. There can be no question of bringing him to trial. A man with his powers could confound our entire judicial system. Won't you give me a carte blanche on this case—and ask no more? I'm afraid that Miller will strike you down, too!"

Overholt shifted angrily in his chair. "I'd give you that assignment

anyway," he said shortly. "Hell, all right! You're running the show from now on. But if you fail to—"

Kildering shrugged. "Then, of course, sir, someone else will have to try his luck. That's our one advantage over Miller—there are more of us."

Overholt nodded, his blue eyes burning into those of Kildering. "I want the whole picture," he said shortly.

Kildering picked up his notebook. "I'll read you some of my notes. After those seizures of insanity, I checked carefully to see if any use of drugs was involved. But the men remained in a state of madness. I wrote: 'Fantastic as it seems, apparently some man is causing this insanity by direct pressure of his will against deliberately selected individuals. This is beyond any known human powers.'"

"*Human* powers," Overholt stammered.

Kildering said slowly, "You are familiar with the philosophy of *Ubermensh.*"

"Superman?" Overholt echoed. "*Superman!*"

There was fright in the eyes of both men, but those of Overholt showed bewilderment—and Kildering's held grim determination. Overholt shivered. He hunched his chair closer to the desk. "Let's have it," he said hoarsely. He did not seem aware that he whispered.

Kildering nodded. "Three things cause mutations in the genes of species," he said, "so far as is known. Cosmic rays. X rays. Radium emanations. Recently—atom-smashing rays have been added. The wide use of the three latter in modern civilization is bound to cause increasing modification of human beings. Sooner or later, and probably earlier because of this very fact of wide use of the rays, a superman is bound to spring up. He is inevitable."

"Inevitable," Overholt echoed the word, without expression.

Kildering inspected him narrowly, glanced toward the prostrate chief, who had lapsed into a drugged sleep. But Overholt seemed normal enough. It was possible John Miller would not attack him—yet. It was possible—

"So," Kildering resumed, "when I found powers that seemed more than human, I wondered if—superman had arrived. I asked myself what such a—person could be expected to do. The monster baby, found dead near Metropolis, was, from descriptions, not a disease-deformed

infant, but something quite different. A mutation. And the scientist who examined it was driven mad! Obviously, then, superman knew his own powers, knew what he was—if I was right. It was apparent, too, that he was trying to reproduce his kind. So I asked the check-up on such offenses." Kildering tossed some papers to the desk. "These dossiers came through last night. I spent the night analyzing them. I was going to report this morning."

Overholt picked up the sheafs of papers, glanced through them hurriedly, while Kildering spoke more urgently, his tone rapid and strained.

"Examination will show four charges against a single man," he said. "A man named John Miller. Most of the valuable data was compiled nine years ago by Morton Eidson—the man who later became police chief of Metropolis and killed himself. I think his suicide proves beyond a doubt that he was on the right track. The chief's use of the name of John Miller confirms it.

"I'll summarize on Miller."

Overholt's hands gripped the papers hard. His eyes had a strange brightness. He scarcely seemed to hear Kildering, but he nodded jerkily now and again.

"John Miller," Kildering said crisply, "is thirty-two. Born in New York City, son of Professor R. B. Miller, specialist in Röntgenology, and Elanor Nichols, his assistant in X-ray work before and after marriage. John Miller's grandfathers were Hans Mueller, a pitchblende miner in Central Europe, and John Nichols, also a miner, who worked in nickel deposits in Canada. Both these mines are sources of uranium, the ore of radium. Two generations, subject to genes-changing emanations."

Overholt nodded. Kildering rushed on; his voice showed increased strain.

"Such a family history, if I were correct in my surmise, pointed to other births of mutations—possibly hideous ones. John Miller had two brothers. One died at birth, a hideously misshapen creature. The other lived six years, a Mongoloid boy."

"An imbecile!" Overholt exploded.

Kildering said heavily: "John Miller's parents recently died of heart failure, but they gave more information before they died. I think the

dossier would have been complete without it, but it is confirmation."

Overholt rasped, "Damn it, Kildering, are you saying that Miller killed his own parents to keep their mouths shut?"

Kildering said: "I don't know. It is possible. But Miller— He was a normal nine-month baby. That is, he was carried the regular length of time, but he was incompletely formed at birth. Hence, actually, he was premature. He was in an incubator for nine months. In school, he was at first stupid and believed moronic. He slept a large part of the day. He was fifteen before he left the fourth grade, but only seventeen when he entered high school. At twenty, he entered college, did the course in two years. A year later, he had a doctorate of philosophy. He was twenty-three then. Nine years ago. Our provable record of him ends there."

Overholt's voice was thin, unnatural. "And you call him a superman? He's a monster! A robber! A murderer! Patricide! And depraved!"

"Yes, sir," Kildering acknowledged, "that would be the normal judgment of a man who did these things. But he's not a man. His history points to a superior intelligence, with an unusually delayed maturity. A mutation—superman."

Overholt pulled to his feet. His eyes were wide and he was looking blankly at the wall. He lifted his hands slowly to squeeze his skull between his palms. "Superman—with three million dollars to continue his criminality," he said thickly. "In God's name, Kildering, what is he planning? What will he do next?"

Kildering's lips twisted in thin determination. "I must find out, sir. Obviously, his headquarters are in Metropolis! But we're men—he's not. We can't predict unhuman behavior."

Overholt's hands dropped. He said shortly, "I want a physical description. I'm going to broadcast it, get every cop in the country on his trail. We'll destroy superman—before he destroys us!"

Kildering felt his eyes tighten in their sockets. Overholt sounded so much like an echo of what the chief had cried a little while before—before he lost his mind! Was it possible that Miller was not content with the destruction of the chief? Was he already at work to destroy the entire F. B. I.?

Kildering leaned forward tautly. Watching Overholt, he said softly, "Yes, we must destroy him—but how can we? John Miller is immortal!"

Overholt looked furtively about him. "We must take precautions," he whispered. "Is the door locked?"

Kildering brought his fist up from his hip. The blow was perfectly timed, perfectly executed. It caught Overholt on the point of the jaw, slammed him back into the chair. He jiggled there for an instant, then slipped, feet first, to the floor.

Kildering stood bolt upright, rigid. His face was drained of all color, and he closed his eyes.

"We must destroy John Miller," he said deliberately, woodenly, "before he destroys us! But we cannot destroy him because he is immortal!"

Walter Kildering waited through a long, long minute, then he repeated the formula. Afterward, he opened his eyes, and there was a horror there, and a dread in the twist of his lips.

"I'm not important enough to worry John Miller," he whispered. "He isn't trying to drive me insane—not yet!"

Through another minute, Walter Kildering stood very rigidly in the office where his two superiors lay unconscious—and insane. He was realizing to the full how powerful was this John Miller. He had not overestimated superman! The entire bureau could be destroyed, man by man—unless Kildering could stop him!

A sob of mocking laughter thrust up into Walter Kildering's throat. He, alone, against superman? But it had to be that way. Meantime, he must turn the wrath of John Miller away from the F. B. I. It was the only way the bureau could be saved!

Walter Kildering flung himself at the annunciator on the chief's desk and slapped down a cam. He ordered Bill Mayor and Marty Summers released and sent to the chief's office, unattended. He put through a telephone call over a private wire to a noted "inside" columnist of a newspaper hostile to the administration.

"This is a hot tip," he told the newspaperman, and his voice was hoarse, hurried, not his own at all. "The F. B. I. is completely disorganized. The chief has gone insane, and his next-in-command is in very nearly the same fix!"

Rapidly, he told the columnist how the report could be confirmed, of the barricade at the doors and the attempt of the chief to commit suicide—

Kildering pushed to his feet. When Miller heard of this, he should

be satisfied—for the present. Walter Kildering was very pale. He was a traitor to the F. B. I.—for its own good. He was about to desert the service—for its own good.

If he succeeded, all would be well. If he failed, his name would go eternally into the black lists of the bureau which he loved, to which he had given the full measure of his life and loyalty.

He had never flinched from death in the service of his country. Why should he shrink from—disgrace?

Kildering's face was as expressionless as a chunk of granite when he stepped outside the chief's office to meet Marty Summers and Bill Mayor as they strode choppily up the corridor.

Mayor checked before Kildering and his fists were knotted at his sides. The black slab of his forelock was awry across his forehead, and his eyes were bitter, hostile.

"I'm going to pay you back for what you did today, Kildering," he said hotly. "This isn't the time."

There was a hesitant smile on the blunt, good-humored face of Marty Summers. "I've been trying to tell him, Kildering," he said, "that you had a good reason for what you did. I keep telling him—you've never made a mistake in your whole career!"

Kildering met hostility and loyalty with the same stoniness. He had chosen these two to fight the battle against superman. It would be his whole force, his whole army of desperation. Without words, he held out a slip of paper to each man. It was on the private memo paper of the chief's office, and the handwriting was the heavy vertical of the chief, with the boldly scrawled initials at their bottom.

Mayor snapped a slip from Kildering's hand. Then he cursed and looked up.

"What the hell's going on here?" he demanded. "You force a barricade the chief has personally ordered me to hold. Now the chief tells us to take all future orders from you! It doesn't make sense. It's crazy!"

Marty Summers said softly, "I told you Kildering never made a mistake!"

Kildering's eyes softened. He looked quickly away. His voice was quiet, but it held the command which men everywhere recognize and follow—the voice of a leader. "We will leave headquarters at once," he said quietly. "Follow me!"

Kildering swung off down the hall, his shoulders squared. Without

meaning to, Bill Mayor found himself following Walter Kildering. Marty Summers marched, too.

No words were exchanged in the elevator, the guard at the barricades honored the slip that Kildering showed them, and he led the way deliberately toward the park. Kildering's eyes swung swiftly about. Very few persons were about. He stepped out on the springy turf, his nostrils wide to the scents of spring. The sun slanted warmly on his shoulders, but Kildering felt cold. He could not get that scene in the chief's office out of his mind.

In the middle of a broad expanse of sunny lawn, he stopped and faced the other two men. They were alone in the middle of populous Washington—alone in more ways than one. Peril was a dark shadow where they stood, though only Kildering was aware of it.

"You are not under my orders," he said quietly. "Those slips that appeared to come from the chief are forgeries. My own. I had to talk to you privately before—I go."

Summers smiled uncertainly. "Why, sure—but a forgery!"

Mayor stared at Kildering, then he threw back his head and laughed. It was a harsh sound. "You, Kildering!" he cried. "You—forge an order! You're lying. What are you trying to keep us out of?" Mayor stared at Kildering again, and he grew very still. "Hell, you're telling the truth!" he said. "Something's up! Forget what I said, Kildering, back there in the corridor. We're with you!"

Summers said, "Look, Kildering, how's about trusting us!"

Kildering looked from Mayor to Summers and felt his heart swell. They had not even questioned his motives in forging orders for them. His voice was even. "I am deserting the F. B. I.," he said. "When you go back, within a few hours, you will learn that there is a traitor in the F. B. I. His name is Kildering."

Mayor said impatiently: "Oh, bunk! We know how you feel about the service. Quit stalling and tell us what it's all about. If you've got a case you're working on, and it's important enough to make you do those things, we're in on it. Eh, Marty?"

Summers nodded quickly, eagerly.

Kildering said sternly: "Wait! Wait, before you commit yourself. I phoned a story to a hostile newspaper which will make the whole United States believe the bureau is completely disorganized. It's entirely possible that the boys will start hunting me down!"

Mayor said: "For God's sake, Kildering, quit stalling! *We know you!*"

Kildering laughed, and the sound was like a sob in his throat. "You trust me—like that?" he asked, and there was humbleness in his tones.

Summers grinned. "I've never known you to make a mistake, Kildering."

Mayor said impatiently: "Why don't you get wise to yourself, Kildering? You're too brainy not to understand that we'll go with you all the way. Now, come across."

Kildering told them then, not everything, but most of what had happened in the chief's office; about John Miller—but not about superman.

"I phoned the newspaper," he finished, "because I believe it absolutely necessary that Miller should believe his attack on the bureau is entirely successful. Otherwise, he will still destroy it, man by man. If he thinks that the bureau is disorganized he will leave it alone—for a while. Before he attacks again, he must be destroyed!"

Bill Mayor's face was angrily flushed. His fists swung restlessly at his sides. "I don't know how anybody could do all that stuff," he said, "but — By God, I want to get my hands on the man who did that to the chief! Just let me get him across my gun sights! What the hell are we waiting for, Kildering? Let's get going!"

Summers' face was pale. His voice was subdued. "Count me in, Kildering," he said.

Kildering held out his hand, and Mayor and Summers clasped it together. They made a strange, stern picture there in the bright sunlight in the middle of a park lawn, three men shaking hands together. Mayor tossed his head up with that peculiarly gallant gesture of his, and Summers' lips held their slow, pale smile. Desperate twin fires burned in the depths of Kildering's eyes, but hope was higher in his heart.

III

The city of Metropolis, spread white and glistening beside the brown, carefully walled-out flood of the great Wichinois River, had a peculiar history over the last nine years. There had been a series of catastrophic fires.

The conflagrations had swept away the ratty tenements, the jumbled factory and elevator districts along the river, the unsightly business district. It was a curious thing that each of these fires had struck at a time

when the recurrent floods of the Wichinois had crippled water and electric supply.

There had been small doubt in the minds of city officials that the fires were started by an expert arsonist, or perhaps a ring of arsonists, but there never had been any conclusive evidence.

The rebuilding had been very intelligent. The multiple suggestions had come from various sources, almost by inspiration, it seemed. The result was good.

Even the streets had been recharted and a splendid civic center amid park lands formed the exact midportion of the city. Around its verges were the administrative buildings, the neatly laid out shopping districts with wide thoroughfares spoking out to the suburbs.

Rapid transit ran underground to speed the outdwelling workers to their tasks where this was necessary; the factories were mostly in the carefully zoned environs.

Metropolis was justly known as a model city, and Wichinois was very proud of the results of those fires, despite the tragic loss of life.

Of course, if the man responsible for those fires could have been located, he would have been executed.

Berger Street was a minor crossway near the Civic Center, the situation of most of the exclusive shops. It was a difficult place for the F. B. I. men to set up surveillance. All auto parking was confined to the multiple fields tucked away in the riverside parks; it wasn't possible, day after day, to keep a taxi engaged in the corner ranks. More especially since they had come away from Washington secretly, without expense money; without even stopping for their clothing. Kildering had insisted on that.

Mayor and Summers had finally found it necessary to rent a small office in a corner, four-story building—the highest structure in this area —and keep their watch with binoculars. The particular shop they observed had no name on the windows or over the door. The windows were small and each of them displayed only a single tiny vial of perfume set against a bouquet of flowers. It was that kind of shop.

The break came on the eighth day of their watch, near the closing hour of the shop. Marty Summers had just about given up hope; Bill Mayor had been skeptical from the start.

"Kildering must be nuts," Mayor said again from where he lay uncomfortably on the desk, resting his overstrained eyes. "He's gone at

this whole thing backward. The man we want is Miller, and he's got us looking for a kidnaped girl that he expects to be walking along the street like anybody else. He's nuts."

Summers smiled. He was usually smiling, and it sat well on the generous width of his mouth. He was young-looking, with a boyish stubbornness about the thrust of his jaw. It was his major value, that stubbornness. He had never acknowledged defeat in any issue and he had a loyalty that was unswerving.

"Kildering does queer things sometimes," he acknowledged softly. "It seems silly to expect a kidnaped girl to walk into a shop because she has a taste for exotic perfumes. But Kildering doesn't make mistakes."

Mayor said: "Oh, to hell with it! Miller is the man I want!" He swung his feet to the floor, and the long, lean line of his jaw was sharp. "Just let me get my hands on the mug that—hurt the chief!"

Summers closed his eyes for an instant to rest them from the strain of the glasses. "Kildering said we weren't to mention that name. I don't know why, but he seemed worried about it. Anyway, we can't look for him. We don't know anything about him, except that women are his weakness."

Mayor's large eyes were narrowed. "It's a screwy business. I don't get this not mentioning his name. I don't get how he could do—what he did to the chief. And I don't see why we can't get a description of the mug. Must be plenty of guys knew him at college. A hell of a description! 'Six feet one. Hair medium dark. Eyes medium gray. Usually talks in a very soft voice. Insisted on wearing gloves at all times and never was known to strip off his clothes in the presence of others.' Now what the hell does all that add up to?"

Summers was peering through the glasses again. "I don't know," he said slowly, and he sounded worried. "I know I don't like the sound of it. He's the worst murderer we've ever trailed. He's got away with three million dollars, and girls he's supposed to have kidnaped are expected to walk around the streets. And that stuff about the gloves and the clothes. It sounds—*ugly!*"

"It sounds nuts." Bill Mayor swung his feet. His good-looking face was sullen. "I want action! I want to get my hands on—"

Summers' voice cut in sharply, excitedly: "Bill! Let me see those pictures of Marianne Winters!"

Mayor took one look at the tense line of Summers' body at the win-

dow and sprang to his side, snatching the glasses. His left hand gripping a strip of candid photographs of a laughing blonde, trembled a little. He peered through the glasses, compared with the pictures, checked again.

"Hair's black; might be dyed," he whispered. "Those glasses change her profile, but—by God, you're right! It's Marianne!"

Marty Summers' smile was broad on his mouth. "Kildering said she'd come," he said.

Mayor swore. "Old Frozen-face, right again! But how in hell he knew that we would find a kidnaped girl walking around the streets loose—" He was striding across the office. He dragged a felt hat down over his even brows, slapped at the gun under his arm.

Summers was swiftly dialing a telephone number. "Repeat orders, Bill!" he called softly. "Kildering insisted!"

Mayor checked by the door, impatiently. "Follow Marianne at all costs. You communicate with Kildering, pick me up if possible. If not, I carry on and communicate when I can. Do nothing without orders from Frozen-face. Allow no violence, no possible development to persuade me to do anything but follow Marianne." The slap of the closing door cut off his words, and his feet made sharp, hurried echoes down the hall.

Summers got a phone number, asked for "Mr. Walters" and was given another number to call. He did that twice more before Kildering's dead level voice came to his ears. He spilled out his report.

"You were right, Kildering," he began. "Marianne— What? You know? All right. All right, I'll try, but this delay—"

Summers slammed up the phone and was plunging across the room. His quick glance out the window while he phoned had shown him Marianne already climbing into another taxi. He had just time to spot Bill Mayor getting into a second. Bewilderment still made Summers' eyes wide as he raced down the steps toward the street. If Kildering knew they had spotted Marianne, then he must be somewhere in sight of their office and the perfume shop! It was like old Frozen-face to take no chances on failure, even with men he trusted!

Summers knew, without being told by Kildering, that he had a double assignment; not only to trail Mayor and pick up any divergent trails of anyone whom Marianne met, but to keep Mayor from doing anything, hotheaded, that might spoil the success of their plans. Bill

Mayor felt the injury to the chief as a personal grief, and a matter for personal revenge. But so did they all.

Summers bolted out into the street and was just in time to see Mayor's cab turn the corner into Liberty Avenue. He signaled another taxi and, swinging into the avenue, was relieved to see both Mayor's and the girl's cabs ahead of him.

Now, for the first time, Summers could digest Kildering's swift orders. "Marianne won't lead you to Number One," he had said, using his locution for Miller. "Any person she meets may be much more important than she is. You take any divergent trails; let Mayor stick to the girl."

But Kildering hadn't seemed excited. He never did, though Summers knew that he felt the injury to the chief as seriously, as personally, as did Bill Mayor or himself. And Kildering didn't seem worried about the immensity of the task before them, or their personal danger. But then, he couldn't afford to. Kildering was—the chief!

It was true that Kildering constantly ordered precautions, and that he isolated himself from them. They didn't even know where his rooms were, and there was always this involved telephoning to locate him. But Summers thought that Kildering was wise about that. It was safer to divide forces. Then if—if Miller destroyed one contingent, the other would be left to carry on!

For an instant, Summers' mind flicked to the man they hunted: to the man who went by the curiously anonymous name of Miller. The things about Miller, or Number One, as Kildering preferred to call him, didn't seem to make sense to Summers. He couldn't fathom the mental processes of a man who had coolly murdered, or driven insane, a dozen persons—probably including his own mother and father—yet who had, in his college days, taken such tender care of the girls he had kidnaped. And tender was the word for it. A part of their preparatory work had been an attempt to trace these early loves of John Miller. Then there were these hints of abnormality; John Miller's own brothers, and the "monster" baby whose examiner had gone insane!

That thought sent a shudder through Summers, turned his thoughts to personal matters. He had not communicated with his wife since leaving Washington. Then he had been able to say only that he was going out under secret orders. It was nearer the truth than the bald

word "desertion." Anne would have felt better if she could have known he was under Kildering; her trust in old Frozen-face was as great as his own.

Summers had plenty of time to think things out during the two hours that his cab held the trail. Marianne Winters made three more stops, changing cabs each time, but she apparently made only a series of purchases. There were no divergent trails and, just at dusk, he saw Marianne's cab pull up before a small bungalow in the Prince Hills district. Summers let his own cab roll two blocks past the spot and turn the corner before he dismissed it. He had already spotted Mayor's cab, parked with its lights out a short distance down the previous cross street. He hurried toward it.

Mayor, slumped in the back of the cab smoking, nodded casually as Summers climbed in. "Saw you back there," he said. "I want to have a look in that house, but I suppose we have to report to old Frozen-face first. Better rent a car on your way to phone, Marty. Can't keep a cab parked here indefinitely."

Summers heard a quiet step on the sidewalk beside the cab and whipped about. His hand snapped to his automatic—then he gasped. *"Kildering!"* he whispered.

Walter Kildering was peering in at them through the open cab window. He nodded easily.

"Come along," he said quietly. "You won't need the cab."

Summers grinned his bewilderment and a load seemed to lift from his shoulders. Just seeing the easy competence of Kildering, hearing his voice, could do that to Marty. None of them spoke again until Mayor had paid off the cab and they were strolling along with Kildering.

Mayor was grinning, and it was apparent he felt the same relief that Summers did. "Well, how do you do it, master mind?" he demanded. "Is it worked with mirrors, or did you just follow Marty?"

Kildering's smile of acknowledgment was faint, and a frown made a knife crease between his brows. "Simpler than either," he said. "I spotted the cab which brought Marianne to the perfume shop, and got her address from the driver. I've rented a furnished cottage across the street from her bungalow and have been staked out there for an hour. The other two 'kidnaped' girls, Rose Darby and Belinda Hayes, are there. But they came separately, and don't live there, since there's only one

bed." He turned into the driveway of the cottage he had rented. In the early dusk, the place gave Summers a stab. It looked so much like his own home, in Washington.

Kildering was saying quietly, "I have two cars here."

Mayor was grumbling good-naturedly. "Why not just send us back to Washington, and carry on alone?" he said. "We're just excess baggage."

Kildering smiled faintly once more. He was preoccupied. "I think our discovery is opportune," he said gravely. "These three girls seem to be strangers to each other, from what I've observed. It's as if they were assembling for action."

Mayor chuckled. "Maybe John Miller is going to drop in on his harem!"

Kildering's head whipped toward him. "Mayor," he said emphatically, "you must not use that name!" His face was paler than usual.

Mayor frowned. "Listen, if you're afraid of that mug, I'm not!" he said. "What the hell difference does it make?"

Kildering drew in a slow breath. "Wait until we get inside," he said. He unlocked the door, gestured the two men inside and flicked on lights in the drawing room. "Sit down, please." He settled himself into a chair at the table, and the overhead lighting emphasized the long, powerful lines of his face.

"Mayor, and you, Summers," Kildering said somberly, "I'm afraid I owe you two an apology. I was something less than frank in Washington. I told you all the facts. I did not tell you what I guessed. I was desperately anxious for your help. I may have minimized the danger."

Mayor grunted: "If it was minimized, I didn't detect it. You said we had one chance in a hundred of living to return."

Kildering said slowly: "I think the chances are rather less than that. You'd better know everything that I can tell you. I think we have time." He peered toward the bungalow across the road. The girls were moving about, crossing and recrossing the lighted windows.

"I'm not sure," he resumed, "that the mere mention of Number One's name aloud isn't enough to draw his attention to us. You already know that Number One has mental powers beyond human understanding—"

"Beyond *human* understanding!" Summers whispered. "I don't think I've heard you express it that way before!"

"No, I have kept from you my true belief as to—what Number One

is," Kildering said quietly, "and I didn't tell you my real fears. I said that the bureau was threatened with destruction. But if Number One could wreck the bureau, killing and driving insane man after man—without once appearing on the scene—he could do the same with—*the government of the United States!*"

Mayor said, "In God's name, Kildering, what do you mean—a revolution?"

"It's a possibility," Kildering said crisply. "I do not say that it is his intention. I think that, if he thinks he is being let alone, the government is safe—for the present. I do not think his plans reach so far as—the White House. For the present."

Mayor asked hoarsely: "God! What is this man trying to do, Kildering? Who is he? *What* is he?"

Kildering spoke slowly. "We must not let our quandary make us careless. Those girls across the street are getting ready to go out. I do not think they will go to Number One. I think they have a task to perform for him which may help us to understand what he is trying to do. As to what he is— Undoubtedly, a mutant of the human species."

Marty said uncertainly, "A mutant?"

"Hell!" Mayor exploded. "You mean this stuff about evolution! Changes in animals and plants caused by the effect of cosmic rays on the genes of a species, producing freaks."

Kildering said: "We'll go out to the cars. Yes, exactly, Mayor. Number One received terrifically superior mental and physical endowments."

"He never," Summers whispered, "allowed himself to be seen unclothed. He's different physically, somehow—"

"A monster"—Kildering's voice was soft—"or a superman. Different from the human species, but sprang from it, as men and apes sprang from the mutations of a single primordial species."

"And this time, we're the apes, huh?" Mayor rasped. "He's got to be destroyed!"

Kildering's tone was a little grim. "I imagine the apes felt that way about it. I imagine the Neanderthalers felt that way about the Cro-Magnons. Tie a red ribbon around a turkey's neck, and the other turkeys will destroy it. The preservation instinct of the herd."

Mayor's voice held the faintest trace of panics. "He's got to be destroyed!"

Kildering's voice was without expression. "Yes, of course. He must be destroyed. Mayor, if you and Summers decide at any time in this case that I have lost my sanity, you have my orders to—destroy me. *My orders!*"

Summers said uncertainly: "To destroy you, Kildering?" The impact of Kildering's final words drove home the urgency of their task as nothing else that had been said. He felt doubts, felt hate rising like heat to his nostrils. John Miller had to be destroyed! He did not think now of government, or of the bureau; scarcely of himself. The entire human species—*apes!*

"Mayor, Summers." Kildering's voice was incisive. "You understand? No human life is important if it prevents our accomplishing the work! You have my orders?"

Mayor said thickly: "O. K., Kildering. And what you say goes for me, too. If any one of us goes nuts, the other two rub him out. We'll just shake on that."

The hands of the three men gripped and clung. They felt afraid there in the darkness. Panic strained at the bonds of their wills. There was a power they did not understand, could not understand, any more than apes could grasp the purposes of the hunter who wants their hides to stuff so as to pose the effigy against a painted canvas in a museum.

Across the street, the voices of women sounded softly, and a taxi bumbled down the street, squealed to a halt. A strangely matter-of-fact sound to men who have glimpsed the abyss, whose horrors their curling nostrils and shrinking ears can only guess.

Kildering's voice came out crisply. "Summers, take the rented car and stick close. Mayor and I will take the other and alternate in trailing. Cut on and off. Do nothing without specific orders!"

Summers stiffened under the commanding tone. Relief flooded him. Thank God for Kildering to give orders. Kildering—who never made a mistake!

IV

The pursuit led straight toward the city, the girls' taxi was exchanged for a private car at a garage, and finally they were rolling steadily through the drives of the green parks that selvaged the Wichinois River. There were glimpses of the black water, smooth enough to mirror the

stars, through the small foliage of spring. Other cars hummed past, tires crisp on the asphalt, and Summers found himself struggling with disbelief.

It was the steadiness of a familiar task, the familiar sounds and smells about him that made the horror he had glimpsed seem so remote. It was not the fear of death that made Summers thrust these things from him; it was the thought of what his wife must be suffering. She would know by now that he was A. W. O. L. She had only the knowledge that he had left with Kildering to support her. There would be money enough for a while.

Marty Summers' mind snapped away from those things as he saw the car he was trailing swing left into a steep gravel drive toward the river. Over against the black loom of the water, the farther shore, he could see the steep prodding silhouettes of big chimneys from some building on the river bank.

Summers' eyes flicked to the rear-vision mirror, spotted the comforting nearness of Kildering and kicked his brake pedal twice to signal, with his stoplight, a left turn. Kildering's headlights lashed out twice across the darkness and, in obedience to the command, Summers pulled his car to a halt.

Kildering leaned out as the cars drew abreast. "Drive over the grass into the cover of the trees," he ordered quietly. "We go on foot from here. That drive the girls took ends fifty yards down—at the city's main electric power plant!"

Summers swung the car obediently from the road, but his mind lingered over Kildering's words. Those three girls were supposed to be carrying out some task for John Miller—and they had gone to the city power plant! In Heaven's name, what deviltry was afoot? He quickly hid the car, trotted back toward the road where Kildering was already standing in the blacker shadow of a leafing maple.

Summers was aware of the keen spring freshness of the air, of the moist living scents of the opening earth; the turf resilient under his feet. From the river, a tug piped hoarsely. The entrance to the powerplant tunnel was a black mouth.

"Mayor's staying with the car, in case of a sudden getaway," Kildering said.

Summers nodded, and they crossed the roadway, angled through the rhythmic planting of the trees. The scent of the river was fresher.

"What can they be planning?" Marty asked softly.

Kildering shook his head. "There have been three tremendous fires, of arsonist origin, in Metropolis. They occurred while the power plant was crippled with floods. But I don't think that's it."

Summers felt a coldness creep up his spine. Without any intention at all, he glanced over his shoulder. Those fires, too, were John Miller's work? The high whine of the turbine generators came to him faintly and, pushing through a shrubbery screen, they saw the girls' car parked close against the wall of the building. It was empty. Light streamed out of the high windows of the powerhouse and the hum of machinery was louder. Marty could see the humped, powerful backs of the generators.

The shooting started just as Marty stepped on the gravel of the drive.

Summers flung back into the shrubbery, whipped his automatic from its holster. He realized then that the shooting was inside the power plant. Five slamming discharges lifted above the machinery hum. A man cried out hoarsely.

Summers gasped, "By God!" He lifted the gun and lunged forward.

Kildering's hand clamped down on his shoulder, held him back.

Summers twisted about. "Those she-devils!" he cried. "They're killing men in there!"

Kildering spoke with an enforced quiet that made his voice sound queer and light. "Yes, damn them! But we can't interfere!"

Marty stammered, "C-can't interfere!"

He was still straining against the grip on his shoulder. His gun hand felt hot about the butt of his automatic. He could see the pale luminance of Kildering's face. Kildering's breathing was jerky. His lips were twisted in pain.

"No human life is important," he repeated his orders of earlier in the night, "if it prevents us from accomplishing our work! These girls are our only possible contact with—Number One. If we interfere with them, they will know we are on their trail. We would be—destroyed. It is not that our lives are important, but that we are the only human beings who know the truth about Number One, and are working to destroy him. If we let the girls complete their . . . their mission, they should report to Number One. Even if it's only by telephone, it should help us to trace him. That's what we want."

Summers stepped back into the shadows, but he drew a little apart

from Kildering. He knew that Kildering was right, knew what it cost Kildering to make that decision, for pain was in every tone of his voice— And yet to be forced to stand by while helpless men were murdered! Summers' teeth locked hard and he jammed his automatic back into its holster. He stole a covert glance toward Kildering. His face held no expression at all—but his eyes were closed, almost as if he—as if he prayed!

The shots and cries had ceased, and there was a sudden diminution in the pitch of the generator whine. A slash of light shafted out across the drive. The door had been opened. Two of the girls stood in the opening. They had guns in their hands and they were staring toward the lighted interior. Easy to take them now—Marty glanced toward Kildering, but there was no change in the motionless silhouette.

Summers' eyes whipped back to the girls. They stood with a braced tension, as if they expected some blow they could not avoid. One of them called out softly: "Hurry, Rose! Those shots may have been heard!"

Summers recognized, with a thinning of his lips, that it was Marianne who called out. Marianne, who liked exotic perfume—who had just helped to kill men!

The whine of the generators dropped still lower and held to that pitch through a while that seemed interminable. The tug whistle sounded again, and the oily swish of traffic came down from the park driveway.

Summers found himself straining his ears to listen, to hear. That was how he happened to know that the girl's scream that lifted inside the power plant and the sudden accelerated hum of the reviving generators, came at the same split second of time. The girls at the doorway were clinging to the posts, *clinging*. It was as if they fought against a strong wind, a tidal undertow that sought to drag them to the earth. They were calling out, and their voices were muted, without resonance.

"This way, Rose!" they called. "Rose, this way. *Hurry!*"

Summers realized sharply that Kildering's hand was grinding into his shoulder again; that Kildering's voice was sharply sibilant in his ear.

"No, Marty! *Wait!*"

He could see into the power plant now, and suddenly the third girl was visible. She walked with a dragging slowness toward the door. All

her body sagged; her arms reached out before her blindly. Her face was terribly pale. It seemed to shine with an internal whiteness. At the door, the two girls continued to call to her urgently. But they did not go inside. They clung to the door and shouted.

It seemed an eternity that the ghostly Rose staggered toward the door. It was impossible that her sagging body should not fall, and yet it did not. Her stumbling feet carried her completely to the sill. It was when she reeled out into the open air that she pitched forward. Summers had one more glimpse of her face as the two girls caught her up and hurried toward the car. Rose's face dangled backward, and caught the full stream of light from the still open doorway.

The girl's face had turned blue!

Summers found himself being drawn back through the woods, and finally he was running beside the long-striding Kildering. But Summers ran uncertainly, and twice he slammed into trees that almost stunned him. Horror had him by the throat. In the name of God, *what had happened in the power plant?*

Gravel popped under the tires of the girls' car as it swept up the drive in second gear. Its motor howled with power. Summers realized they were being distanced, though their path was far shorter. But Mayor would take the trail, and with luck they would be able to swing into the tail end of the procession. Summers felt anger take possession of him. Damn it, *he* wanted to be the one to do the trailing! When John Miller was found—

Summers shivered. It was the first time he had ever yearned to kill a man. He was sobbing curses when he swung in behind the wheel of the car. It was a long time before his breathing and the sick pounding of his heart eased.

Before the end of the park drive, they came in sight of the two cars. Mayor was faithfully on the trail.

Summers said, then, "The girl's face was *blue!*"

"Cyanosed," Kildering said slowly. "Suffocation indicated."

Summers echoed the word stupidly. "You mean—gas?"

Kildering shook his head, but there was a vertical crease between his brows. He didn't speak until, trundling along a dark back street a block behind the fugitive car, they saw the door of the car whip open and a bundle, hideously lax and lifeless, tumble out in the roadway!

"Signal Mayor to take the lead," Kildering snapped. "We'll pick up the girl!"

Summers kicked the brake pedal to signal Mayor, and the third man, from whom they had taken over the chase, sent his car swishing past. It was Kildering who swung the girl into the back of the car. The easy co-ordination of his trained body made the task seem simple. Summers, his face very white, had the car rolling instantly.

"Is she dead?" he asked presently.

"Quite dead," Kildering said, and his voice was puzzled.

Summers' jaw ached from clenching. He began once more the game of leapfrog with Mayor's car on the trail of the two girls. He whirled off the line of pursuit, cut in ahead of the girls and let them pass. Mayor turned off into a side street and presently relieved him when he had dropped back. Then Summers switched off his headlights, cut in the dimmers and presently began to forge ahead again.

But the pursuit was uncomplicated. The two girls drove straight back to Marianne's bungalow and rolled their car into the garage.

"Now what?" Marty asked.

But Kildering had already leaped out of the car and was sprinting toward their own garage. When Summers joined him, he had a set of headphones clamped over his ears—and he was still frowning.

"I managed to put in a phone tap this afternoon," he explained, "but they haven't made a call. When Mayor comes, we'll pay a visit to our murderous neighbors across the street—and restore their friend to them!"

Summers said: "Carry the dead girl there? But why? If we didn't interfere at the powerhouse, when we could have saved some lives—"

Mayor came striding into the garage and had to be told what happened, and his eyes held on Kildering while he listened. When it was finished, he echoed Summers' challenge. "I'm not questioning orders," he said, and his voice had a curious light tightness. "I can see why those men in the powerhouse couldn't be saved, but doesn't the same thing hold good now?"

Kildering shook his head. His voice was a little tired. "That held good as long as there was any hope that they would immediately communicate with Number One," he said. "Since they haven't done it so far, it must be because such a report isn't necessary. If we invade their

quarters, we may be able to frighten them into making an attempt to communicate with Number One. That will be our chance!"

Mayor laughed shortly, almost happily. "We're dumb, Kildering. Just forgive us. Thank God, we're going to begin to fight!"

Kildering's face was strangely pale. He seemed to be thinking out loud. "The reason that the agents of Number One do not have to report," he said slowly, "must be because there will soon be evidence that they have succeeded. It should come out over the radio, either in police calls or newscasts. Summers, you will listen in on the receiver in the car; bring us news of any development involving electricity, or persons who work with electricity. Come on, Mayor, we've got to move fast!"

Mayor marched beside him toward the car. He could find no fault with Kildering's logic, but in God's name, what could he expect to eventuate from that attack on the powerhouse?

"I'll carry the girl," Mayor said shortly. "Better for one of us to have his gun clear. And you're the best shot."

Kildering agreed with a quiet monosyllable and Mayor wrenched open the door of the car, peered down at the inert body on the floor. The girl's clothing was disarranged, and it was obvious she had been searched thoroughly. Even in the laxness of death, her face was lovely. Her hair had the crisp brilliance of life, and the blueness had faded. Mayor's hands were tender as he reached for her.

Mayor pulled and the body lurched toward him. Its inertia dragged it to the ground and the head hit the soft turf jarringly. Mayor had seen enough of the dead to know no especial revulsion in their presence, but this shook him strangely.

"Damn—Number One!" he rasped.

Anger ran hotly through Mayor. He stooped and seized the body roughly, heaved it face down across his shoulder. Breath gusted from the compressed lungs in a small wheezing moan. The arms and legs thudded limply against him, and he had to clamp the corpse on his shoulder. He set his teeth fiercely. Without words, he started across the street. The dead girl's hands patted his left thigh, softly, *pat—pat—pat.* There was perfume in the girl's hair and it titillated his nostrils. He lengthened his stride, half running. Behind him, Kildering's feet made no sound.

"Silently!" Kildering's voice soothed him. "We will go on the porch."

Mayor mounted the steps quietly, feeling his choked breath like suffocation. Kildering's voice, muted, was sharp and mandatory in his ear.

"Throw the corpse through the window!" he said. "It will startle them—give us a chance to enter. These girls are killers!"

A strange horror had Mayor by the throat. He stumbled forward—and threw the corpse!

The glass crashed, jangled to the floor as the body smashed through the window. Mayor heard a smothered scream and, for that crazy moment, he thought the corpse had cried out! Kildering went past him in a smooth rush of motion. He went through the window, headfirst, diving! Mayor saw Kildering somersault flashingly, land lightly on his feet. Kildering's voice was sharp and cold.

"No, don't try for your guns!" he said. "I never hesitate to shoot murderers, of either sex! John Miller is clever to use women gangsters, but it won't work against us!"

Mayor climbed fumblingly through the window, caught Kildering's gesture to pull down the shades and obeyed. There was muted, rhythmic music from a radio.

The two girls had scrambled to their feet from chairs beside the radio. Mayor looked at their frightened, horrified faces and forced himself to remember that, less than an hour ago, they had shot men to death. It was pretty hard to remember. Marianne's dye-darkened hair deepened her pallor; her blue eyes were shadowed. Belinda kneaded her slim white hands. Her shoulders were hunched as if she were cold.

Kildering's voice was as passionless as death—and as menacing. "Now," he said, "you will talk. You will tell me how to find John Miller!" The gun lifted steadily in his right hand. "Have you seen what .45-caliber bullets can do? But I forgot—you saw tonight what your own bullets did!"

Mayor shook his head, pulled his eyes away from the two girls. He was a little behind Kildering and, once more, the gallant carriage of that upflung head thrilled him. This was strange conduct for Kildering—but Mayor knew no doubts. It was Kildering—it must be right!

The music picked up dulcetly and, a man's voice cut in: "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a news flash. Metropolis. Four men were murdered in an unexplained raid tonight on the main electric power plant of the city. There was only a slight interruption to power

and the police were at a loss to explain the attack. The four men, operators of the plant, were shot."

The music picked up dulcetly and, incredulously, Mayor heard Kildering laugh! It was not a pretty sound.

"Shall I phone the police and tell them who did that?" Kildering asked. *"How can I find John Miller?"*

It was Marianne who got out words. "Who are you?" she asked. "I don't know what you are talking about." Her tone was as cold as Kildering's.

Mayor heard Kildering speak, and the words didn't make sense to him. Kildering said: "I am the son of Police Chief Eidson, whom John Miller killed. You will understand from that why I will not hesitate to kill to learn what I want to know."

Marianne repeated woodenly, "Chief Eidson's son."

She reached to the mantel above the cold fireplace for a cigarette, sat down as she lighted it. She tilted her head back on the cushions of the chair and closed her eyes.

Kildering said, *"Not that way, Marianne!"*

He jumped forward and his fist connected solidly with her jaw. The other girl, Belinda, cried out in a choked voice and ran toward the door.

"Stop her, Mayor!" Kildering snapped.

Mayor wrenched himself into action, flung his arms around the girl and wrestled her back into the room. She fought like any other woman, high heels kicking, nails clawing. He flung her violently into a chair, stood over her, glowering. Slow drops of blood oozed from a scratch across his cheek. He told himself again that these girls were killers, and still he did not understand why Kildering had punched the other girl.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kildering remove a leather case from an inside pocket and take out a hypodermic. "I'd advise you, Belinda," Kildering said steadily, "not to attempt to put yourself into mental communication with John Miller, as Marianne did. No, I'm well aware that you can't do it directly, but I don't know how receptive *he* is. It's probable that by concentrating, in relaxation, you could make it possible for him to form contact with you. That was what Marianne tried. That was why I hit her."

He had the needle ready. He jerked Marianne's sleeve aside, and in-

serted the needle of a large hypodermic in her arm. He worked the plunger steadily.

"Sodium amytol," he said, "I think that, presently, Marianne will tell us what we want to know."

Belinda huddled into the chair, under the menace of Mayor's lowering regard. She worked her hands. They were slim, inutile. There was a smear of blood on one nail.

"You're wasting time," she said stranglingly. "She doesn't know how to reach—*him!*"

Kildering made no answer. He finished the injection methodically, laid a finger against Marianne's throat pulse. His face was completely impassive. The music from the radio continued to swim placidly into the room. A car bumbled past in the street. Belinda began to sob quietly, her face buried in her hands. Presently, Kildering began to call Marianne by name, sharply, insistently. After a while, she answered, thickly.

"Where is John Miller?" Kildering demanded.

Marianne mumbled, and Kildering prodded her again with the question; again.

Marianne said: "How . . . how dare you! You refer to *him* like that!"

Mayor's head twisted about. Kildering's face still showed no expression.

"Where is *he?*" he asked.

Marianne's head rolled from side to side. Her eyes were half opened. The smile on her mouth was tipsy. "Not Judas," she mumbled. "I won't betray *him!*"

Kildering's eyes held a blazing intensity. His voice was humble. "Tell us, Marianne," he said, "so that we, too, may worship *him!*"

"You want to worship—*him?*"

"Yes, Marianne. Yes. We want to worship *him!*"

Belinda started to her feet. "No, no!" she cried out, gasping.

Mayor whirled on his heel, and his hand lashed out. Belinda crumpled, crying. Kildering's eyes flashed an instant of approval at Mayor, then went back to Marianne. Mayor's thoughts were a confused whirl. What the hell was this Judas and worshiping business? Anybody would think they were talking about a god, instead of a crook who had murdered a dozen people and turned these girls into killers, too.

"Tell us where *he* is, Marianne, so that we, too, may worship *him!*"

Marianne's head rolled fretfully. "Don't know," she whispered. "Don't know where *he* is. Worship the Lord for He is good and His mercy endureth forever."

Kildering's face seemed to close in on itself. Mayor felt that, although there was no visible change. It was exactly as if Kildering had closed his brain with an actual door.

Kildering looked sharply about the room. His voice came out harshly: "Knock Belinda out, Mayor! Someone's trying to communicate. I can feel it. Knock her out, *unless you want to die!*"

Mayor wrenched himself out of his abstraction. Belinda started to her feet, and she had a gun in her fist. Before she could pull the trigger, Mayor's fist crashed home. The girl bounced out of the chair, slid to the floor.

Mayor knew that his heart was pounding heavily. He glanced at the shadowed dimness of the hallway, and suddenly he strode there and switched on the light. Nothing there. Of course.

It was then that Mayor recognized the pounding of his heart as fear. He listened to Kildering hammering at Marianne with rapid questions and getting only a lot of religious gibberish. Hell, they treated this John Miller—this Number One as if he were God!

"How can you communicate with *him?*"

"Oh, pray to *him!*" Marianne chanted. "Pray to the All-Powerful, the All-Good. *He* will set you free!"

Mayor's hands clenched until the muscles of his forearms ached. He was thinking desperately. Those two F. B. I. men in the hospital had questioned a woman—and they were dead!

"Kildering!" he said hoarsely. "We've got to get out of here! That mystery ray the newspapers talk about—"

"We're in no especial danger," Kildering said quietly. "Marianne says the Holy Spirit was to honor them with sons as a reward for tonight. No doubt the reason for the perfume. After the 'honor,' it will be dangerous to approach them. Not now. Miller is just trying to find out what is happening here. I think—"

Kildering broke off, stared down at the two unconscious girls. "Outside, Mayor," he snapped. "Quickly! Back door!"

Mayor whirled and went pounding ahead of Kildering. He whipped out his gun, but it did not make him feel much better.

"What's up?" he demanded.

Kildering stood before him in the darkness behind the house. Feeble rays from the inner lights sifted through the glass panel of the back door, spilled across his face. It was intense, white. His eyes held fire.

"You will remain here, on guard over those two girls," Kildering said quietly. "Number One will communicate, mentally, and probably with Marianne. My guess is that she will attempt to bribe you into releasing her. Permit that, and follow. Number One will almost certainly try to release those two girls from danger—if he can do it without danger to himself. I must warn you of this, however. The release he gives them may be death!"

Mayor said: "Damn it, Kildering, you mean he'll kill them to protect himself? What a hell of a cold-blooded—"

Kildering's lips were faintly sardonic. "Of course, my fellow ape!" he said.

Mayor fumbled his gun, peered toward the house. A scowl drew his brows hard down over his eyes. Presently, his head came up. He tossed the ever-dangling black lock back out of his eyes, and there was challenge in the gesture.

"Right you are, Kildering," he said steadily.

"Good luck," Kildering said, and his tone was somber. "You're on your own, Mayor. Summers will back you up at a distance. If anything —interferes with me, you are in command."

Mayor whipped about. "What are you going to do?" he demanded, his voice hoarse.

Kildering's lips twitched. "I am going to pray to *him,*" he said slowly.

He turned and marched off into the darkness, and Mayor felt his jaws relax. He swore under his breath. Mayor thought his own post dangerous, but Kildering had chosen the harder task for his own, as he always did. Kildering would deliberately attempt to put his mind in contact with—with *his!* Perhaps it would help to track down Number One! It was more apt to result in insanity!

Mayor turned heavily back into the house. His nerves were taut, but his jaw was set in grim determination. He stood and looked down at the two unconscious girls, at the sprawled body of the dead one beneath the window. Mayor drew in a slow breath, and his eyes turned fierce.

"I just want to get you across my gun sights, John Miller!" he said violently. "I'll show you this particular ape—has teeth!"

In the parked car, Kildering had finished giving Summers his quiet instructions about backing up Mayor when the radio program's music broke off abruptly, with the old formula.

"Metropolis," the newscaster rushed on. "Only the safety devices of the subways here prevented serious accidents tonight when the motormen of three different subway trains fell dead at the controls of their engines. Police said that the faces of the three men turned blue. Keep tuned—"

Kildering flicked off the radio, and sat with his face rigid and cold. Beside him, Summers spoke uncertainly.

"Is that it, Kildering?" he asked. "Is that what those girls did at the powerhouse?"

Kildering shook himself visibly. "I'll have to postpone—my prayers," he said. "By interfering with Number One's plans, perhaps I can force him to—pay attention to me."

"Is this it?" Summers repeated.

Kildering turned toward Summers with a faint twist of his lips. "Yes," he said. "For reasons known only to himself, *he* has started on a campaign of mass murder! The elimination of—the apes!"

V

Through a telephone call, Walter Kildering located Mayor Francis O'Shea at his office and directed there the taxi he had called. Afterward, he leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes. His head sagged limply in relaxation. His lips lost their rigid line, became gentle. It was a face that Walter Kildering rarely showed to the world.

Music came softly from the radio; the hum of tires on asphalt blended with the bass of the governed motor. A moist softness was on the night air, the promise of a gentle spring rain. Kildering sucked in a slow quivering breath. The world was restless with stirring life, and John Miller gave—*death!*

The music of the radio broadcast broke, and the announcer cut in again. Strain was apparent in a peculiar tonelessness that contrasted with the usual blithe elegance of radio voices.

"There have been seven more deaths in Metropolis of this strange sickness that turns the faces of the victims blue. Mayor Francis O'Shea issued a statement that the entire hospital staffs of the city, and its biological laboratories, were being mobilized and that government help had been asked in an attempt to discover swiftly the causes of this illness. Mayor O'Shea emphasized that there was no cause for alarm, but until the causes could be learned, he urged the people to avoid congested areas and to make sure of ample ventilation at all times. There will be more later."

Kildering's relaxation was blotted out. The softened strains of music annoyed him now, and he flicked them off. If Mayor O'Shea were taking such steps at once, there must have been already a more violent reaction on the part of the people than was reasonable to expect.

The taxi driver twisted about. His face was bewildered. "What do you think that stuff is, mister?" he asked anxiously. "I made a run past City Hall just before I got your call, and there's a big mob of people there. Thousands of them. Cheez, guys' faces turning blue!"

Kildering said quietly: "That really means very little. Any sickness that affected the heart or the lungs would cause suffocation and hence turn the faces blue. Can you tell me where I can, at this hour, get hold of some luggage? A secondhand shop or pawnshop would be best."

When the taxi rolled to a halt on the fringes of the crowd about the City Hall, Walter Kildering got out deliberately. He carried a small, worn black bag like a doctor's, and as he moved through the thinner portions of the crowd, his manner was changed. He moved with the crisp, busy stride of a doctor; his eyes abstracted and his face severe.

A man glanced about at Kildering's touch on the shoulder. Then he pushed aside and called out:

"Hey, here comes one of the docs! Let the doctor through!"

Kildering nodded, said, "Thank you!"

The word ran through the crowd. Resentful faces took on an aspect of respect, of hope, even of pleading, as their eyes sought the calm countenance of Kildering. He felt the appeal like a pain in his breast. These people were helpless now, their self-sufficiency sapped in the face of forces they did not understand. They turned to the doctors as to priests for salvation in disaster; presently, unless this plague were checked, they would begin to cry out in anger against these same men. And they would turn to the court of last appeal, the churches. Kil-

dering saw the whole course of the slaughter clearly, during the brief, slow transit through the frightened crowd. He felt his own anger rise, and recognized it as a symptom of a conviction of helplessness. If he could only understand! Why had John Miller determined upon mass murder?

There was some delay at the police-guarded doors of the City Hall, but his F. B. I. credentials gained admittance for Walter Kildering. The speed with which he was ushered to the mayor's office was a new and unneeded proof of the fears and helplessness of the city administration. There were five newspapermen grouped outside the door of the private office of the mayor. Kildering brushed them aside, went through into the mayor's suite.

Mayor Francis O'Shea stood on braced, straddled legs behind his desk. He had a mane of grizzled hair, a pale, intent face. His speech was heavy, deliberate.

"You boys from Washington work fast, Kiidering," he said curtly. "I hope you can do something."

There was a map of Metropolis spread out on his desk, marked with red crosses. In contrast with the radio announcement of a total of ten deaths, there were scores of them. They covered the entire city. There was a cluster of fifty at what Kildering identified as the city prison farm.

Mayor O'Shea jerked his head toward a spare, stern man who stood beside the desk. "Chief Surgeon Mouline," he said. He nodded toward a shouldery, keen-faced man, whose bushy eyebrows were red and contrasted strangely with a bald and gleaming head. "Chief of Police Parsons. I've got a council meeting in ten minutes. Any suggestions, Kildering? As you see, we've been trying to spot the center of contagion geographically. No luck so far."

Kildering glanced at the map, inspected the three men steadily. Mouline's eyes were hostile and the chief of police, Parsons, was clearly out of his depth.

"I'd like to speak to you privately, Mayor O'Shea," he said. "No offense to you, gentlemen, but Washington has some private information which must be held very closely."

Mayor O'Shea grunted, jabbed carefully tended fingers through his mop of hair. "You Washington boys like mystification, don't you?

All right, Mouline, Parsons. Go up to the council meeting and tell them I'm coming. I'll need you there anyhow."

The exit of the two men was angry. Kildering put his eyes on the brooding, suspicious stare of Mayor O'Shea.

"In the first place," Kildering said quietly, "this isn't a plague. It's mass murder by the same criminal who robbed your banks and destroyed your previous police chief, Eidson. No germs are involved. It's done by electricity, and the attack on your main power plant tonight was part of the plan. To stop the deaths, you have merely to switch off all electric power in the city."

Mayor O'Shea's reaction was precisely what Kildering expected. Bewilderment, doubt, and anger carved the man's big squarish face. After twenty seconds, he swore and shouted:

"You're crazy! What the hell are you talking about?"

Kildering felt weariness run through him. What hope did he have of defeating John Miller when stupidity and disbelief fought on Miller's side? But you couldn't blame people too much. It was bewildering—

"What the hell?" O'Shea demanded roughly. "Even if what you say were true, what could any guy gain by killing people wholesale? What's the reason?"

It was a question Kildering couldn't answer, of course, and there was no use in further confusing the issue by expounding the theory of John Miller's antecedents—of supermen. Instead, Kildering turned to the map.

"I'm afraid you'll have to blame Washington mystification for my failure to answer that, Mayor O'Shea," he said, "but look at the map. Check your records. You'll find that every one of these deaths is either near a power plant or connected in some way with electricity, if only in the operation of a vacuum cleaner. You can make a simple test. Simply turn off the city's current, and see if the deaths don't stop."

Mayor O'Shea frowned down at the map, glanced uneasily at Kildering. "You know I can't do that," he said fretfully. "It would throw the city into panic! Frankly, I don't believe you, but nobody else has been able to make any suggestion at all. If there were any proof—"

"The first three victims were subway motormen," Kildering said quietly. "Four men were murdered at the main electric plant. What's

happened to the men who took over after them? Look at your map. There's the drive through the park close to the power plant. There seem to be fourteen red crosses there and at the powerhouse. Fourteen people dead."

Mayor O'Shea stood with both hands braced on the desk and swore, steadily, without particular attention. His shoulders were oddly hunched. He seemed deformed. Kildering's eyes, half veiled by lowered lids, studied the man's face intently. He seemed honest, confused.

Kildering stepped toward the desk. "You usually have a man polishing your linoleum floors with a machine at this hour, don't you?" he asked flatly. "Do you mind asking where he is at work?"

Mayor O'Shea's head jerked about to face Kildering. "Good Lord! I'll stop him!" He reached toward the annunciator on his desk, but didn't open the cam. "That's nonsense," he said. "Electricity couldn't do it!"

Kildering leaned across the desk, and the steely gray of his gaze stabbed deep into O'Shea's eyes. "You are willing to risk not only that man's life, but the lives of thousands in your city!" he said crisply. "You risk that—because you don't believe! Have you the right, Mayor O'Shea, to make a gamble like that?"

O'Shea shifted uncomfortably. "But, damn it, man," he began, "I don't see how—"

The door of the office was batted open without warning. A man ran staggeringly across the width of the long room, did not check until his hands struck the edge of the desk. He leaned there, supporting himself rigidly, panting for breath.

"The floor polisher," he whispered. "Dead! His face—*blue!*"

Mayor O'Shea stared at the man without words. His head moved slowly from side to side as if he would deny the thing he heard, but his eyes fixed finally on Kildering. He surged to his feet then.

"I didn't know," he whispered.

Kildering pounded at him. "Do you wish to be known, Mayor O'Shea, as the man who refused to save his city? As the man who, knowing how all these people were killed, refused to do the one thing that could have saved them? It is very simple, you see. Just turn off all the electric power in the city. I can't keep it secret any longer. I'll ask you not to attempt to stop me." Kildering was backing toward the

door. "I am going outside and tell the people there that you know how to save the city, and refuse to do anything about it!"

Mayor O'Shea's hand reached out. "Wait," he said. "Wait a moment. You swear to me— No, no, that isn't necessary. That poor man. Mike, wasn't it? Yes, Mike. Poor devil, never harmed a soul in all his simple life." Mayor O'Shea lifted both hands to his face, covered his eyes. Presently, his hands dropped and his shoulders came back. "All right, Kildering, you win!"

Kildering opened the door beside him, stood where he could command any who came in.

"Call in the newspapermen," he said, "and tell them. When you turn off your power, they won't be able to print the papers, but they'll find some way of spreading the news." Kildering was aware of the five reporters, crowding in through the door, heard their sharp, shrewd questions.

"Gentlemen," Kildering said softly, "Mayor O'Shea will tell you that the plague is spread by electricity. He will tell you that he will cut off all current in the city! My name, gentlemen, is Walter Kildering, of the F. B. I., and I want it published."

"What's this, a gag?" one of the newsmen jeered.

"Is it, Mayor O'Shea?" Kildering asked softly.

Mayor O'Shea's voice roared out: "It's the truth, so help me God!"

The newspapermen were dashing off for their telephones. One of them lingered an instant in the doorway. "Walter Kildering?" he said easily. *"Kill* as in murder, *deer* as in reindeer, *ing* as in Chinese laundry?"

"One *l* and one *e,"* Kildering said crisply. "Also quote me as saying this is not a plague, but a mass murder by the same man who robbed the banks here, and whom you christened the 'Unknown'!"

The newspaperman said, *"Wow!"* He turned and sprinted.

Kildering kept his shoulders against the wall. "Sorry to use these methods against you, Mayor O'Shea. And I'm not trying to grab publicity for personal glory. It is my idea that when the criminal responsible for these deaths learns my identity, he will make an effort to— eliminate me. It is my hope to turn the tables on him. I might say our only hope!"

Kildering stood for an instant longer, and his face was drawn and

haggard. He smiled then. Frozen-face Kildering smiled! It was gentle, almost womanish in its sweetness. His voice was a little weary.

"Good night, Mayor O'Shea," he said.

He closed the door gently behind him, and Mayor O'Shea stared through a long moment at the closed portal, and said nothing. His assistant waltzed around the desk, slapped at a cam. He was already shouting before he got the connection open.

"Stop that man!" he cried. *"Stop that—"*

Mayor O'Shea's hand clamped down on his assistant's shoulder and he whipped him away from the annunciator.

"Let him go," he said. "No, no. Let him go. He's not crazy. So help me, God, I think . . . I *think* he was telling the truth!"

The assistant stared at Mayor O'Shea. "Look, you can't let him get away with that!" he said hoarsely. "You can't let him grab credit for stopping the Blue Death. You gotta do that! Look, this is election year and the boss isn't going to like it if you let somebody from Washington grab the credit."

Mayor O'Shea's face was a trifle bemused. His eyes were staring at the closed door as if he saw a vision. He brushed his hand across his eyes, shook his head as if he cleared it from a stunning blow.

"You gotta grab the credit!" his assistant insisted.

Mayor O'Shea's eyes turned shrewd. He whipped toward the annunciator. "Stop Kildering," he snapped into the speaker. "The man who just left my office, yes. Of course! He's gone crazy! But be careful; he's armed! Maybe you'd better tell the cops that. They'll know how to deal with an armed man!"

His assistant chuckled. "Geez, boss, you're smart!"

Kildering was just leaving the elevator when he saw one of the uniformed police go toward a jangling phone near the guarded doors. "Yeah, Sergeant Deal," he rasped. "Stop who?"

Kildering's gun snapped into his fist and blasted in the same instant. The echo slammed dizzily through the high vault of the hall, and Sergeant Deal staggered back from the phone, both arms flung protectingly before his face. The phone was smashed to bits by Kildering's bullet.

"Sergeant Deal," Kildering said quietly, "drop your gun on the floor and disarm your men. At once! I won't hesitate to kill at need!" The

quality of command in his voice struck like a thrown knife. He was obeyed. Before the elevator doors opened to release a new flood of uniformed police, Kildering had faded into the crowd.

Lost amid them, he lifted his voice. It was not a heavy voice, but it had a ringing timbre that carried it a long way over the heads of the close-packed people.

"I'm the doctor from Washington!" he said. "I told the mayor how to stop the plague, and he refused. Make him stop the plague, or you'll all die! Make Mayor O'Shea stop the plague! All he has to do is to turn off the lights! Come on, men, make him stop the plague!"

It took a few minutes to get the mob moving. A wave of blue-coated police rolled out on the steps before the high bronze doors of the City Hall, and Kildering pointed to them.

"See, the mayor won't stop the plague!" he cried.

The mob roar started as a murmur like distant wind, and it grew with the same speed. It was a hurricane that beat against the portals of the City Hall, that drove the police back before it in spite of the muted hammer of hastily drawn guns. The storm raged into the corridors of the building—

Detaching himself from the remote fringes of the mob, Walter Kildering found a taxi, abandoned by its driver. He climbed in behind the wheel and sent the machine sweeping back toward Prince Hills, toward the death watch he had set Bill Mayor and Marty Summers to keep.

Speeding northward, Kildering was grimly aware of the danger to himself which he had deliberately invited. It was his belief that John Miller could not strike at him, as he had at the chief of the F. B. I., unless John Miller knew his whereabouts. He was by no means sure of that. It might be enough merely to know the identity of his potential victim. But there seemed to be no other way. Efforts to trace allies to John Miller were unavailing; the next logical step was to force John Miller to come after him!

So far, Kildering had been successful. He knew that the mob would force Mayor O'Shea to turn off the electric power. The newspapers, or the radio, which had its own power, would carry to John Miller the name of the man who worked against him—Walter Kildering. Yes, this gave more promise of success. Kildering should have been elated. He told himself that. The truth was, he felt unutterably depressed.

Who was he, Walter Kildering, to hope that he could defeat John Miller? He had declared that John Miller must be destroyed. He had dared to interrupt the smooth working of John Miller's plans, interfered with his workers.

No question, Walter Kildering thought wearily, about what must happen. He must destroy John Miller before John Miller destroyed him.

A sharp doubt arose in Kildering's mind at that thought. Could John Miller be destroyed? The chief's talk of John Miller being immortal was silly, a madman's ravings. The chief had set out to destroy John Miller, lest he himself be destroyed, but he had gone crazy over a conception that John Miller was immortal.

Driving steadily northward, Walter Kildering threw back his head and laughed. Silly idea, a man being immortal. But, of course, John Miller wasn't a man. Not in the scientific sense. He was a mutation of the species, a superman—

Kildering found that his hands gripped the steering wheel with a terrible tightness. His arms were so rigid that it was hard for him to turn the wheel at all. He glanced about him at the darkness that crowded close and impenetrable about the car. He realized that the sky was overcast and that a slow-falling rain blurred the windshield. He reached out and switched on the windshield wiper, and the monotonous clicking swing of the blade held his eyes like a magnet. It was hard to drive and look at the wiper, but he couldn't help watching—

Its pendulum swing was like his thoughts. "*Kill* John Miller, or *he'll* kill *you! Kill* John Miller, or *he'll* kill *you!*"

The refrain ran on in Kildering's mind. He tried to break the rhythm, and he couldn't. It kept on and on inside his head, until he found his lips moving silently to form the words. He was saying them aloud for some while before he was conscious of it. But now the words had changed a little, a very little.

"You *can't* kill John *Miller.* John *Miller* will kill *you!* You *can't* kill John—"

Walter Kildering tried to stop saying that. He tried terribly hard. He fought first to stop speaking, then he fought with clenching jaw muscles to stop the flow of words. To close his eyes, to do anything to shut out that awful, destructive rhythm.

"John *Miller* will kill *you!*"

He was still speaking the words, hurling them against his clenched teeth. He was shouting them, singing them in a fearful cracked voice that he could not recognize as his own. Walter Kildering coldly gripped the wheel and drove the car. There was a part of him that could sit back and do that. There was another part of him that swung its eyes, its head from side to side with the rhythm of the wiper blade. That part of him chanted this absurd dirge of despair.

It was that colder, separate part of Walter Kildering which, with the slowness of clock ticks, beat out the words of his thoughts. Beat them out while the body part of him still chanted the dirge. What Walter Kildering thought was:

"This is madness. *John Miller has driven me mad!*"

Walter Kildering had not, up to that moment, consciously realized the invasion of his brain by the power of John Miller. He had invited it, challenged it so that he could find and combat John Miller. And it had come upon him unaware.

Too late, Kildering recognized the nature of the thing that was happening to him. He was shrieking, laughing insanely. He was incoherent with his terror and his madness.

"Save me from John Miller!" he was shouting. "Save me! Oh, God, save me!"

Kildering fought to gain control over himself and he could not. He fought then, with a new purpose. He fought to pull steadily on the steering wheel. His hands fought each other. When his right hand tried to pull one way, his left hand tried to pull the other. His own body was fighting him, at the behest of John Miller!

That was when Walter Kildering used his madman's cunning. His thoughts swayed to the swing of the dirge that John Miller had planted in his brain. His eyes, his head swung. His whole body was a pendulum that swung from threat to panic flight.

Right: I can't kill John Miller.

Left: John Miller will kill me.

Right: I can't kill John Miller.

Left: John Miller will kill me.

Very subtly, very slyly, Kildering kept the thought out of his mind. He wouldn't let John Miller know what he was going to do. It was very simple, really. The street was slimy, wet with the slow fall of the spring rain. His body was swaying. Why shouldn't the taxi swing, too?

A little pull to the right, a little one to the left; another to the right, harder to the left.

Yes, the taxi was swaying now to the dirge. It rocked. The motor roared at its governed peak. The tires began to scream in time, a scream to the left, a scream to the right!

Walter Kildering lost his thought, but he kept whipping the wheel left and right. It was beautiful the way the whole universe kept rhythm to the thought of the power of John Miller. The street lights swayed; the street swung and dipped. The tires screamed.

The rhythm broke suddenly. The street was no longer swaying. It was whirling, and the scream of the tires went on and on. The taxi was spinning, lunging toward the curbing, toward the remote small houses set among their framework of shrubs and hedges. Walter Kildering swayed behind the wheel, his mouth wide open, screaming.

It was only in the last instant before the taxi struck that a fragment of thought flashed across his brain. Maybe this, too, was part of John Miller's plan! This madness, and then—suicide!

Walter Kildering screamed. He clasped his futile arms about his head.

The crash of a wrecked car is a peculiarly explosive sound. There is the mingled rip and whine of torn metal, the sound of the blow. Afterward, there is the jangle of broken glass, perhaps the cries of the injured.

This time, the scream came first. And it stopped with the crash. Afterward, there was only the small soft sigh of the night wind, and the gentle *tap, tap, tapping* of the spring rain. Gentle as the rhythm of a mother's finger, shaken in warning at a child. In remonstrance—

VI

It was not quite dawn when Walter Kildering recovered consciousness, knowing weakness and pain and despair. He was aware first of a tremendous singing and chirruping of birds, of the dawn freshness after a night of gentle rain. He could sense that even through the acrid cleanness of antiseptic odors.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the young, tired face of a man in his shirt sleeves, a stethoscope dangling forgotten around his neck.

The man smiled, slowly. "You had a good bit of luck," he said, "choosing my porch for a crack-up, Mr. Kildering. What happened? A skid?"

Kildering's lips moved stiffly. "Yes, luck," he agreed.

He lay quiet, through a long minute, realizing that this man was obviously a doctor. But his luck was greater than that. John Miller had relaxed the pressure upon his brain. He felt an immense weariness, but his mind was clear. He remembered those last few frantic seconds, and his eyes strained wide with recalled horror. He heard the doctor speak soothingly, and shook his head.

"No, it's all right," said Kildering, and his voice was almost normal. "Thank you, doctor. I see you know my name, doubtless my identity. Please tell me, precisely, the nature of my injuries. I realize my left arm is broken. What about my ribs?"

"Three cracked," the doctor smiled faintly. "You also had a very ugly gash across your cheek and throat. Which was why I said you were lucky. I always keep hemostats close by."

Kildering nodded; he felt the tug of his wound. "Loss of blood, then," he said.

Awkwardly, he pushed aside the covers and slid his legs toward the side of the bed. The doctor did not help. He stood, hands resting on the foot of the bed, and watched. His eyes were speculative.

"I won't try to tell you about keeping quiet," he said. "You had a concussion, of course. That arm fracture is double, but not compound."

Kildering had his feet on the floor, and they felt wooden. His legs were rubber. He seized the head of the bed with his right hand. He —stood up.

Sweat sprang out on his forehead. His right palm was slimy against the headboard. He sucked in deep breaths.

"Loss of considerable blood," he said thickly, "but I can manage."

The doctor watched him doubtfully, but Kildering's head came up, and his lips were firm. His eyes burned palely.

"I can manage," he said again.

The doctor said slowly: "Your job must be pretty important. I'll put a note in your pocket in case you keel over again. No more transfusions for another twenty-four hours."

Kildering saw then that there was a strip of adhesive on the inside of the doctor's left elbow. The doctor had given of his blood, as well as his skill!

Kildering said slowly: "I may be able to recompense you some day, doctor. You're . . . more than kind." His lips twitched. "The police have your report?"

The doctor shook his head. "The police are pretty busy. The trucks go by every hour, but the hospitals say they don't need me. They're dying too fast for medical help."

Then Kildering remembered—and saw that the lights still burned! They were bright in the ceiling; they made white spots of illumination on the corners. In some way, he had failed!

He said harshly: "I must be going! One thing I can tell you, doctor, that may help in some degree. This is no disease that is killing men. It is an electrical emanation. It is spread through the municipal system. If you keep your power turned off in the house, you have a chance to survive!"

The doctor said gravely: "Thank you. Are you sure you have to go?"

Kildering saw that the doctor thought this a vagary of his accident-shocked mind. He could not press the issue. His strength was very far gone. He fumbled into his clothing with the doctor's help, while his mind raced back over the events at City Hall. He had failed there, somehow. John Miller had flicked aside his interference, as casually as he had brushed Kildering out of the picture. It was not through John Miller's weakness that Kildering was alive now. He would have to have the help of Marty Summers and Bill Mayor. Kildering found himself thinking of them longingly. They would not need explanations. Summers would give of his loyalty, and his unswerving service; Mayor of his brilliant courage and wit— If they, too, had not been brushed aside by John Miller!

"A taxi?" he asked hoarsely.

"They've all been commandeered by the police to help carry the dead," the doctor said heavily. "The subway station is a block away. I'll drive you there."

"The subways are death traps," Kildering told him dully. "Your radio, or newspapers, should tell you that much. Could I, possibly, hire your car?"

"I'll drive you to your destination if it's not too far," the doctor agreed. "I can't do more than that."

Kildering heard his own voice, muffled by weakness. "You are kind."

The dawn was smoky with the stench of burning oil; with other, nameless, odors. A truck trundled heavily past while the doctor backed out his car. The dead were stacked like cordwood. The horizon was dull red with pyre flames, a dozen, a score of them. Kildering's hand, gripping the side of the car, shook a little.

"How many dead?" he asked hoarsely.

The doctor shook his head, driving steadily. The headlights threw a dim patch of orange light. Dawn was gray and murky in the east, and the bird song had ceased. The tires and the motor made the only sound. They passed more trucks. One was stopped and men in glistening suits that covered them from necks to fingertips, faces grotesque in gas masks, carried a dead man out of a house. They swung the body up hurriedly. A woman's wailing rose and dwindled as the doctor's car rolled past.

Kildering beat his fist softly on his knee. "What does the radio say?"

"The stations are all dead, Mr. Kildering. I mean, the mayor ordered them off the air."

Kildering twisted his head about. "You don't believe my theory of the electricity. Is that because you have been using it extensively during the night?"

The doctor swung out into an avenue, drove a little more rapidly. There was another fire in the east now: the sun.

"I made X rays, of course," he said. "We also cook by electricity."

Kildering lifted his hand to his forehead, leaned on it. He couldn't be wrong about it, unless there had been some other reason for the raid on the power plant. But the dead were all somewhere near electrical units. The prison and the insane asylum had been heavy centers of death, judging from O'Shea's map; poor simple Mike at the City Hall— But the doctor and he both had survived, despite X ray and stove and other electrical equipment.

Kildering's head whipped up, and his nostrils arched with a shock of discovery. He had been puzzled over John Miller's motive. But now—

"Doctor," Kildering said rapidly, "you will recall recent experiments with the electrical-wave frequencies of the brain, and the incidence of Alpha impulses as compared with individual intelligence."

The doctor's head swung about sharply for an instant before he was forced to look back to his driving. "Why, yes," he said slowly. "As I recall, in low-grade mentalities, the frequency of the Alpha waves was definitely much lower than in higher intelligence."

Kildering nodded. "That was my memory," he said. "Now, compare that fact with this. The asylum population has been completely wiped out; the prison inmates were destroyed in large quantities by this so-called Blue Death. You and I, apparently, remained unaffected. The victims obviously die of suffocation."

The doctor nodded, more alertly. Kildering rushed on.

"The deaths are similar to those that occur under anæsthetics," he said. "Other tests have shown that complete anæsthesia results in a reversal of the electrical nerve impulses. Instead of flowing, as normally, from environs to the brain, they begin, under complete anæsthesia, to flow from the brain to the nerve termini."

"True!" the doctor said alertly.

"I believe," Kildering said slowly, "that this is the key to the entire matter. Certain electrical impulses are being released. They affect only persons with low mental frequency of Alpha waves. In those instances, they induce a complete anæsthesia which results in death."

The doctor said slowly: "It's possible, I suppose, if you knew a hundred times more about the operation of these brain electrical currents than any living man; if, then, you were sufficiently an electrical genius to be able to direct only the proper type of current, and the proper strength— Good God, man, are you implying that someone is doing this? That someone is destroying all the low-grade mentalities in Metropolis?"

Two trucks rolled past with their grim loads, bound for the outer region of circling fires. Towers of black smoke marked their locations now, faintly tinged by the red and yellow of flame. The men in their anticontamination garb, their masks, were other-worldly. They lurched to the rumble of their trucks. An infernal scene.

"In God's name," the doctor said hoarsely, "who would do such a thing, and why?"

Kildering shook his head, but his gray eyes glittered like ice. "If you are wise," he said slowly, "you will forget what I have said. You can do nothing about it, except protect yourself."

"That's absolute nonsense!" the doctor said sharply. "No man would do a thing like that! It's a disease, this Blue Death!"

Kildering nodded slowly. "You're probably right at that. It was a wild speculation. Would you let me out here, please?"

The doctor put on brakes. His movements were violent, and his throat cords were taut, his face reddened as he shouted.

"It's absolute nonsense!" he cried. "No man would do a thing like that!"

Kildering said: "You're quite right, doctor. Just forget the whole thing! And I thank you, more than you know, for what you have done!"

He turned away, moving heavily toward the cottage he had rented the previous day. His eyes, glancing shrewdly over the street, spotted Summers' car, and Summers, a black shadow behind the wheel. So nothing had happened here! Their watch had been in vain. Why not? John Miller believed that Kildering had been destroyed. If he knew of these other two, he did not fear them.

The doctor's feet rasped with an accent of exasperation on the pavement behind him. The doctor's hand was rough on his shoulder and Kildering staggered, weakly, under the thrust.

"I want the truth!" the doctor said sharply. "Tell me the truth! Who is destroying men like this?"

Kildering saw Summers plunge from the car, race toward them with a drawn gun. He shook his head, moved his right hand in a faint gesture to check Summers. His eyes went to those of the doctor, saw the horror in their depths.

"Don't get excited over a pipe dream!" Kildering laughed at him. "You, a doctor, believing things like that! You're overtired from working over me all night, and I'm lightheaded. You know no man would do what I said. What profit would he get from it?"

The doctor studied Kildering's face. The doctor's eyes shuttled, peering into first one orb, then the other, in the manner of men who stand too close.

The doctor sighed, stepped back and pressed hands to his forehead.

"You're right, of course. There would be no profit in it. I think you'll be all right, Mr. Kildering, if you don't overdo it."

"Thank you again, doctor," Kildering said gently. "I hope I can repay you some day for what you have done."

The doctor stumbled to his car and Kildering's eyes followed him pityingly as he drove away. Best for the doctor not to know the truth. It would only throw him in opposition to John Miller—and that was fatal!

Summers came up anxiously. He had a newspaper in his hand.

"We thought you had succeeded, Kildering," he said, "and this stuff against you was just camouflage. The mayor accuses you of killing a floor polisher named Mike and stirring up riots. He says he learned, from that, a way to check the Blue Death. He urges a plentiful use of electrical equipment. Says it will ward off the germs."

Kildering stared at Summers incredulously. He seized the newspaper and his hand shook as he glared at the eight-column box beneath the headlines. No mistake there. The mayor's statement was unequivocal:

"Use of electrical power, plenty of it, will protect you from the Blue Death!"

In the face of that, the mayor's tirade against himself, the charge of murder and rioting, became unimportant—even silly. Kildering laughed crazily. And he had thought he had John Miller checked! It was pretty obvious, wasn't it, that John Miller now ruled Mayor O'Shea completely!

Summers' hand touched his arm solicitously. "Is that wrong?" he asked. "What happened to you?"

Kildering sobered himself by a violent effort. "I had a little mental brush with John Miller," he said, and his voice was humble. "I owe my present quasi sanity to the fact that he thought me already destroyed. Nothing has happened here? No. Then call in Mayor. We have a job to do. Call him in! Do you think John Miller doesn't know about your watch? We simply aren't important enough to destroy!"

Kildering turned and marched toward the cottage. He stumbled on nothing and threw out an arm to catch his balance. When Summers ran to assist him, he heard something that sounded like a sob. Frozen-face—*sobbing!*

Summers decided he was mistaken.

When Summers brought the sleep-drugged Bill Mayor to the cottage, Kildering sat at the dining-room table with the paper spread out before him. He cut short inquiries about what had happened, tapped the paper with his right hand.

"John Miller's plan begins to take shape," he said, his voice heavy and slow. "This Blue Death is aimed at the destruction of all low-grade intelligences. As such, it probably has already passed its peak and is waning. Mayor O'Shea announces, through the papers, that a philanthropist has purchased from their owners every rented home and apartment in the city. Henceforth, each man owns the quarters he now occupies. They will be given deeds if they report to certain established offices. Owners will be paid from the city treasury at their own figure. And all banks are closed, as a precaution against panic resulting from the plague."

Bill Mayor's head lost its weary droop. "What the hell has all that got to do with John Miller?" he demanded. "They can't do anything like that under the law."

Kildering was frowning. "John Miller is giving every citizen of Metropolis a stake in the city through possession of his living quarters. The banks— I don't know, unless he is stripping them of money to pay off the landowners, or to fill his own pockets."

Summers was slow in finding speech. "That doesn't sound much like a criminal, does it," he said, "giving people their own homes?"

Mayor snorted. "There's a trick in it. He's voiding titles so he can grab them off. Or he plans to slap on taxes—that is, if he's as powerful in the city government as this indicates. Is John Miller the same as Mayor O'Shea?"

Kildering said quietly: "No. According to the paper, all radio stations are closed, and even the mails are being held up to prevent spread of the contagion of the Blue Death. I have an idea that a similar protection will be set up, on some pretext, over telephones and telegraph. Mayor O'Shea has closed every road out of the city, is refusing to permit trains to enter or leave—to protect the good people elsewhere in the State of Wichinois!"

Mayor bent over the newspaper and read hurriedly where Kildering indicated. He began to swear in a low, angry voice. He straightened and still he swore.

"We're locked in," he said harshly. "The city is locked in. No out-

side communication. And Mayor O'Shea is in John Miller's vest pocket. Damn it, John Miller *owns* this city now! Whatever he wants to do—"

"Whatever he wants to do," Kildering echoed emptily. "Twenty-five thousand dead in one night!"

Mayor strode to the window, stood there with his fists knotted behind his back. Marty Summers sat like a drunken man. His thoughts ran in circles. No good questioning those girls across the street any further. They couldn't tell a thing. No need watching them any longer. He didn't know just what Kildering had done, but it was plain that it had been worse than futile. Mayor swung about, came back to the table slowly.

His voice was angry, baffled. "What do we do now, Kildering?" he demanded.

"Yes, what?" Summers asked hollowly.

Walter Kildering shifted a little in his chair. There was a dull agony in his side, and his arm was giving him a great deal of pain. His brain was swimming, too, with weakness. He put those things out of his mind. They looked to him for leadership. He must not fail them!

"I'm afraid I overestimated my abilities," Kildering said thickly. "We three are not enough to defeat John Miller. The truth must be carried to Washington. The entire strength of the nation must be thrown against John Miller. I misjudged. I thought John Miller would not strike while we left him alone. But apparently his period of preparation is finished. He is launching his attack."

Kildering dropped his hand. His voice was very earnest. "No man can foretell how far John Miller will press this attack," he said. "He may be content for the present with Metropolis. He may stop when he has conquered the State of Wichinois. He may not stop before the nation, and the world, are under his dominion! I . . . I'm trying not to exaggerate. It's hard, when you deal with John Miller."

Mayor knotted his fists. "Together, we can get out of this trap and spread the word!"

Kildering shook his head. "You will go, Mayor. Summers and I will remain and do what we can against John Miller."

"I won't run away, damn it!" Mayor shouted.

Kildering's lips twisted bitterly. "Running away would accomplish nothing at all, if John Miller were interested in your destruction! You will be in as great danger in Washington, or in China, as you are here.

No, no, I'm *not* exaggerating! The chief went mad. I— But I don't matter. Believe me, Mayor, you will be in greater danger on your errand than here in Metropolis."

Mayor nodded crisply. "I'm taking your orders, Kildering. I'll go."

Kildering's voice sounded tired. "Remember that you probably won't be believed. You will have to persuade someone. Perhaps the president himself. From the bureau's viewpoint, you are probably A. W. O. L. If Overholt is still sane— Wait until night, Mayor. Until then, rest and prepare yourself. I haven't examined the defenses, the cordon Mayor O'Shea has set up, but I would suggest the river as the best chance. Come, Summers."

Kildering pushed himself heavily to his feet, swayed an instant before he kept his balance.

"Where are you going?" Mayor asked brusquely. "You're almost out on your feet!"

Kildering shook his head. "That's our job, Mayor. You have yours. And yours is more important. All Summers and I can hope to do is to harass John Miller, and focus his attention here in Metropolis until you can rally the nation against him. We will have to move very carefully not to be destroyed at once. I have found out that John Miller doesn't have to locate a man to drive him mad. He need only know his identity."

He held out his good hand abruptly to Mayor. "The country is counting on you, Mayor, though it doesn't know it. I'm counting on you. Good luck."

It was the second time Kildering had smiled. Bill Mayor stared at him, at that gentle smile upon the lips of old Frozen-face, and he could only take the proffered hand dumbly.

It was when Kildering was already going out the door that Mayor found his voice. "I'll get through, Kildering," he said harshly. "Or a piece of me will! Enough to make those damned fools in Washington see sense! Good luck, Kildering!"

Kildering waved his hand awkwardly. Summers grinned back uncertainly over his shoulder, and Bill Mayor was left alone. He found that his eyes were stinging. He was damned sure he'd never see either one of them alive again. He knotted his fists. His head wrenched back and he stared up at the blank ceiling.

"Oh, damn it!" he whispered prayerfully. "Oh, damn it!"

Summers' thoughts were upon death, too, as he followed humbly in Walter Kildering's wake toward the car. He did not question Kildering's decision; could not, since the way lay so clearly before them. They would fight a battle against John Miller, delaying him until the main body of the army, the F. B. I., could engage him. *They would harass John Miller!*

Summers swallowed a hard lump in his throat. It sounded a little like trying to worry God. He fought against a feeling that they would prove no more effective, and his thoughts went fleetingly to Anne Summers, off in Washington.

"Where to, Kildering?" Summers asked briskly, as he slid in behind the wheel of the car.

"Pass by City Hall," Kildering directed quietly. "Our job right now is to locate Mayor O'Shea and await our opportunity to reach him. John Miller has either driven him mad or bought him. At any rate, he is the spear point just now of Miller's attack. The point must be—blunted. Perhaps it will force Miller out into the open. It should at least hamper Miller."

Summers felt a mild sense of shock at Kildering's offhand use of the name, "Miller." Exactly as if he were any other crook they hunted. Miller. John Miller.

"Do you think we can isolate O'Shea in the daytime?" he asked slowly.

"Unlikely," Kildering admitted, "but I wanted to separate myself from Mayor so that he would be safe for a while. I'm a center of contamination. Through me, Miller might destroy us all. I'm going back to the office in Berger Street. I'll rest there, against tonight. You will keep watch and phone me directly at the first hint of possibly isolating O'Shea."

"Summers, if any doubts of my sanity occur to you at any time, knock me out. If it's still there when I recover, kill me."

Summers' face was very pale, his eyes staring as he glanced pleadingly at Kildering. Kildering was not smiling now.

"I assure you, Summers," he said flatly, "that I'll do the same to you."

Summers shuddered a little, but he did not dissent. "Is there no way of protecting ourselves?" he asked. "If there isn't, our first move

against . . . against Miller will be our last. You say he need know only the identity of the man he wants to drive insane."

"Or to kill," Kildering added dryly.

"He . . . he can kill people mentally, too?" Summers hesitated.

"I believe so." Kildering's voice was flat, without resonance. "Miller seems to strike at the conscious brain centers; only terminally at the subconscious. If, after each of our raids, we secrete ourselves and knock out our conscious brains for a period of hours, we may escape. Miller can't concentrate perpetually on driving us mad. Even he must use his mind for other purposes on occasion, and I have to believe that it takes a terrific concentration of psychic force either to kill or madden a human being. Only exceptional men are able to control apes mentally; even they could not drive one mad, except by physical means. That may be because their mental organization is too low—"

Kildering's voice trailed off. Summers felt a tremor race through him. If Kildering felt like that, there must be no chance at all! Good Lord! Imagine a brain which surpassed the powers of men by an even greater margin than human brains exceeded those of apes!

Summers swore. It was a thing he didn't often do. "How will we knock ourselves out?" he asked thickly. "Repeated concussion would be damnably dangerous."

"I have quite a supply of morphine."

"But, Kildering, we'll become addicts! How long can we stand up under that?"

Kildering shook his head. He looked out the window of the sedan at the rain-washed freshness of lawns and homes and parks. Below them, in the valley by the sun-sparkling Wichinois River, the buildings of Metropolis formed a many-spired cathedral. White, clean white. There was a black smear across all that purity this morning, a smear of smoke that tainted the air with the stench of burning oil—and burning flesh.

A line of trucks marched uphill slowly, manned by their gargoyle crews, bearing their pitiful freight toward the fires. The bellow of their motors seemed bestial, hungry, carrying their prey to the sacrificial fires.

Kildering's nostrils arched whitely. "I hope John Miller likes the perfume of his altars!" he said harshly.

The night was hours old, and the calm white moon, lurid in her veil of pyre smoke, rode high toward the zenith when finally Summers phoned Kildering.

"The boss has gone home," he reported, masking his meaning. "He must be lonesome, he took so many watchdogs with him. Six."

"Come for me," Kildering instructed flatly.

Kildering's whole body felt heavy as he walked down to the street. The gnawing in his side and broken arm had nagged his nerves raw. The wound in his face and throat had stiffened, so that turning his head brought a deep knife stab of pain. Leader of the van against John Miller! Kildering's lips twisted thinly—and even that caused pain.

Summers' smile was warm but weary as he flung open the door for Kildering. "O'Shea's had a busy day," he said flatly. "A succession of demonstrations. A couple of mobs were shot up by the police. They were worried about the Blue Death. Three parades chanted O'Shea's praises. They were the people who have been given title to their homes. Lawyers and apartment owners got short shrift. They stood out on the sidewalks shouting, afterward. A lot were arrested. There were mobs around the banks, too. What the hell is John Miller trying to do?"

Kildering shook his head. "All this is preparation for some other move. Or it may be merely a sop to keep the mass of the people partly pacified for—whatever Miller is planning. Where does O'Shea live?"

O'Shea's home was a columned mansion of white stone, set well back from the road behind a formally planted lawn. The grounds were surrounded by a high iron fence, spiked at the top, and every room in the house blazed with light. Two uniformed policemen stood on the porch. There were others at the gates—an even dozen visible guards.

"Probably more inside," Kildering said quietly, as they drove past without checking speed. "Your six must have been merely his mobile bodyguard."

Summers said heavily: "Well, that's out, then. What do we do now?"

Kildering shook his head. "Drive back to the city and find a policeman your approximate size."

Summers' eyes whipped toward him. "You want me to masquerade as a cop? I'd have to have an awfully good story to get through to O'Shea."

Kildering's profile was like chiseled granite. "There's a warrant out for me, according to the papers, and O'Shea made a statement."

"Blaming you, in part, for the Blue Death," Summers said angrily. "He said he would question you, personally, when—*I get it!*"

Kildering said quietly: "Yes. Policeman Summers is going to capture Walter Kildering and take him personally to be interviewed by Mayor O'Shea! Now, find that policeman! A police car, too, would be desirable, but might prove too dangerous."

They didn't get the police car, and the uniform cap had to be padded to fit Summers' head. Walter Kildering was without his hat, and his mouse-colored hair was awry. There was a smear of blood across his forehead; his tie was askew and his collar torn.

Summers didn't have to simulate excitement. He rolled the car at high speed, slammed on brakes at the gate as the two cop guards whipped up their guns.

"I got Kildering!" Summers called out sharply. "Mayor O'Shea wants to see him!"

Kildering glared at the policemen. His right wrist was handcuffed to the dash, in plain sight. "This is stupid," he said harshly, "and Mayor O'Shea will answer for it! You can't arrest an F. B. I. man, you dumb flatties!"

The cop on guard jumped to the running board. "Oh, we can't, huh? You men think you're tin gods!"

Summers shot the car up the drive, jerked to a halt before the porch. He was out in a quick jump, had snapped Kildering's handcuff to his own left wrist. He had a police revolver in his right fist.

"He's not going to get away from me!" Summers said grimly.

"Stupid ass," said Kildering. "Nobody else would find it necessary to beat up an injured man!"

Summers struck at Kildering's head with the gun. "Shut up, you murderer!" he snapped.

It made a convincing show as they stumped up the steps to the front door, and Summers announced his capture importantly. "Did it myself," he said, "and I'm taking him in, see? I ought to get a sergeantcy out of this!"

The cops guffawed, but there was envy in their eyes. They got through to the mayor's study, and O'Shea came down from his bedroom in slippers, with a bathrobe thrown on hurriedly over his pa-

jamas. His mane of gray hair bristled above the excitement of his heavily squared face.

His shrewd eyes took in Kildering's bandages, the handcuff that secured him to Summers' wrist. He gestured sharply at the other uniformed men in the doorway.

"All right," he said curtly. "I can handle this. Close the door! Get back to your posts!"

"I caught him!" Summers said eagerly. "I was going off duty, and I saw him sneaking along a side street. I jumped him!"

O'Shea's eyes whipped toward Summers' face. He was frowning. "You were doing what? Going off duty?"

Kildering's hand snapped free of the handcuff, whose lock was previously sprung. His automatic snouted suddenly from his fist.

"Don't speak, O'Shea," he said quietly, "or you're a dead man. We don't mind dying, if we can take you along! Our story was a little inept, I perceive. Naturally, no man would be going off duty in a crisis like this. Get behind him, Summers, and crack his skull if he tries to call a warning."

O'Shea's face stiffened under the shock of that pointing gun. He took a slow step backward, and Summers tapped his gun barrel gently against the back of his head.

"Remember," Summers said crisply. "Keep quiet!"

Kildering said: "It was thoughtful of you to have no windows in this room, O'Shea. From the lack of resonance in my voice, I suspect it is fairly well soundproofed, too. Very considerate, O'Shea. Very."

Mayor O'Shea stood on straddled, rigid legs. His head swung, lowering forward, and his voice held contempt. "You will be destroyed the moment I will it!" he said harshly.

Kildering's voice was dead even. "It is possible. If I don't first nullify your will with a bullet. Mayor O'Shea, I told you how the Blue Death was spread. Instead of checking the death, you deliberately caused more people to be killed, by urging them to employ electrical power as a preventive. Why?"

Mayor O'Shea laughed shortly. "It is the will of the Lord that they should die!"

"Ah!" Kildering's voice was soft. "The will of the Lord as personally revealed to you?"

A queer exalted light shone in O'Shea's eyes. His head was lifted magnificently; his face transfigured.

"Yes!" he whispered. "He sent his angel to bring me wisdom! Oh, God is great and his mercy endureth forever!"

Summers' face, behind the mayor, was shocked, incredulous. "Miller drove him insane," he whispered.

Kildering shook his head, his eyes keenly on O'Shea's face. "Not insanity, Marty," he said. "Mayor O'Shea has seen the light, and he has been converted to the faith."

"I have seen the light!" Mayor O'Shea chanted, "and I am free! Oh, great is the Lord! The Master! You fool, you cannot harm me! The Lord will send an angel to destroy you! O Lord, hear my plea—"

"Hit him!" Kildering snapped.

Summers' gun barrel slammed against the back of the mayor's head. He lurched under the blow; his knees sagged.

"Blessed are they which are persecuted—" he whispered.

He slumped to the floor, heavily.

Summers stared down, incredulously, at the fallen man. "What the hell is all this?" he demanded roughly. "Does John Miller think he's God?"

Kildering was already at the mayor's desk, shuffling rapidly through the papers and memorandums there. "It's a convenient subterfuge," he said shortly. "Mayor O'Shea believes; those girls believe. An angel of the Lord—which is to say, the psychic projection of John Miller—told him what to do. Naturally, O'Shea obeyed."

Summers had one hand braced on the desk. It was the only thing that held him up. He pressed his forehead. "I feel . . . funny," he said. "My mind—"

Kildering's fist struck as a snake strikes, fiercely and without warning. His eyes were strained wide and there was torment in his face as Summers pitched, unconscious, across the body of the mayor. Kildering was staring, blindly, at a dim corner of the room. A golden light was beginning to glow there!

Kildering sobbed a curse. He flung himself across the room toward the outer door and locked it swiftly. His right hand was trembling, and the curses kept bubbling from his lips. He doubled back toward the desk at a hard run, spilled out the contents of a leather case from

his pocket. A hypodermic needle, already filled, tumbled on the blotter. He plunged it into his flesh!

The light in the corner was brighter. In its midst, a shadowy form was beginning to take shape.

On the desk, the telephone whirred. Kildering's hand stabbed toward it, while his eyes held on that glowing light.

Death was here, he thought, but he was still fighting with all the strength of his superkeen mind. He must still gain a few hours' delay for Bill Mayor. He and Summers were doomed, except by the luckiest of chances. He might stall off insanity or death with the needle; the police might not come to investigate the long silence of the room. It was unlikely. Mayor was the only hope now; Bill Mayor in his break through the lines for help.

Kildering snatched up the phone. His voice held the indignant rasp of O'Shea's tones. "Don't interrupt me!" he snapped. "Don't call again unless I phone! I'm getting a confession!"

The voice of the man was apologetic. "Sorry, Mayor O'Shea, but you said to keep you posted. We just shot a man trying to escape from the city. Shot him swimming in the river. He drowned."

Kildering snapped: "All right. All *right!*"

His hand fumbled as he poked the phone at the cradle again. So that way was closed, too! Mayor had been shot! Kildering's eyes stung. He had to survive, he and Summers! His brain was numbing fast. He could move his limbs only with gigantic effort, and there was no feeling in them. Violently, he fought against the drug for a last minute of movement, of conscious thought. The light in the corner—magnificent now, exquisite. There was a face there, the face of an angel. Beautiful—

Walter Kildering wrenched his eyes away from that compelling face. He groped for the gun on the desk, found it. He stumbled across the room. The sweep of his arm hurled a decanter of brandy to the floor, spilled the alcohol across the rug. He tried to bend over, and he fell to his knees. He began pulling the trigger, so that powder sparks would reach the alcohol fumes.

Some part of his brain counted the shots. He thought he could smell the scorch of fire; couldn't tell. One shot left. Walter Kildering fell toward the mayor. He pressed the muzzle of the gun close, jerked at the trigger.

Walter Kildering, face down on the floor, could not tell whether he had fired that last, utterly necessary, shot. He could not tell because hot pincers were tearing at his brain. Because of the face amid the golden light. A beautiful face—hellishly beautiful—

VII

It was the moon that defeated Bill Mayor in his effort to escape from Metropolis and bring help to the stricken city. Just around midnight, the moon found a few scattered clouds in which to hide its face. Bill Mayor made his dash in those moments of darkness.

Mayor thought that he had figured out every step of his escape. He loosed his car, motor roaring, to charge down the slope toward the flood wall and the pickets along the river. That was to draw the guards off their posts. He sprinted to a tree he had selected, went up it like a cat and sidled out along a branch that reached over the flood wall.

Exultation was in him then, as he poised on that branch. A swift dive, and he would be away from Wichinois! He plunged out into space—and the moon popped out.

The moonlight caught the momentary gleam of Bill Mayor's body, stripped to shorts, as it flashed through the night toward the water. And one guard saw him. He was alert, gun cocked in his fist, because of the alarm. He was one of the supertrained Metropolis force's best marksmen.

He whipped up his gun and made a snap shot, crying out: *"Got him!"*

Bill Mayor didn't hear him, or hear the shot. He thought, in that flashing moment of pain, that he had struck a rock just on the surface of the water. A rock that drove him sideways, doubled him into a knot in the middle of his dive—

He hit the water like that, went under. A slab of dark water reached high against the face of the white concrete wall, silvered as it spattered in the moonlight. A second bullet troughed the surface a moment later, gouging out a towering liquid splinter.

Then the moon, its task completed, hid behind another cloud.

Perhaps it was the coldness of the spring flood that did it. Perhaps, the subconscious working of Mayor's dazed mind. He knew, as he sliced deeper, deeper into the black water, that he had been hit with a

bullet. It gave him the anger he needed to survive. The current tugged at him strongly. He helped with feeble flaps of his arms. He couldn't kick, couldn't feel his feet at all.

He broached the surface as gently as the rising dead, floated there, motionless. He heard sharp cries on the banks. The round, menacing eyes of flashlights winked at him from the flood wall. They made pale-brown ovals on the water. The patches of light ran about like questing hounds, madly eager for the kill.

A tormented thunder, a slashing sputter of gunpowder sparks marked the muzzle of a chattering submachine gun up there. The tracers drew crimson streaks across the night. Bullets whipped the water like dirty cream. The froth raced toward him, nearer, nearer—Ten feet away from Mayor, the bullets held steady. They chewed a floating log butt, sleek as a man's head, to silvery bits.

Mayor had enough presence of mind to scream, stranglingly. Somehow, he managed a dive. When he came up again, the flashlights were all focused back there where the log had been.

So Bill Mayor could drift on with the current, alone in the darkness. That darkness was creeping inside him, inside his brain. His side and back were no longer numb. They were an agony.

In Bill Mayor's mind was only one thought, now. He had to keep afloat. He fought to do that. He fought through æons of black and agony-slashed time. He fought so hard that even when hands caught his wrists, reached under his arms, he tried to knock them away.

That was the way Mayor remembered the black-and-gray time that followed, as a fight to keep afloat. He made it, too. The day came when he opened his eyes and realized he was in the small, tight cabin of a boat. He was in a bunk. And the air had the taint of fish.

The companionway was opened presently, and an unshaven face, bristling with red beard, was poked in.

"Hey," the man said. "Awake, are you? Hey, Lila, your patient's got his eyes open!"

The man stumped down into the cabin. He was barefooted, trousers twisted about his knees. He pared plug tobacco into a calloused palm, had a cold pipe clamped between stained teeth.

"Didn't figure you had a chance, brother," he said equably. "Wanted to throw you back for another time. Seeing as how you fought so. But Lila says—"

The girl was barefooted, too. Yellow plaits were twisted about her head in a coronet. Her body was strong, sturdily built. She looked healthy and extraordinarily happy. Her lips parted generously over strong white teeth.

"So," she said. "Some broth, and you sleep some more. You'll do, brother."

Bill Mayor found his voice was very weak, and his will limp. He drank the broth and slept. The second day, he learned that the bullet had torn through his lumbar muscles and set about devising a brace that would take the strain off it and let him walk.

Lila and her father, Jan Posk, were fishing the Wichinois, fifteen miles below Metropolis.

"Can't sell nothing there now, brother," Jan Posk grumbled beside the bunk, while he fouled the air with his stub pipe. "Shoot if you come near them, the fools. Though the plague fires ain't burning no more."

Lila smiled and shrugged. "The river feeds us. After while, we sell again. That Metropolis is funny. Tell me, now, they pay grownup folks to go to school. Tell me, they pay them to play games. Grown men, playing games. Is funny, yes?"

"Who tells you?" Bill Mayor asked sharply.

Lila shrugged again. It was extraordinarily graceful, especially when she wrinkled her nose in that broad grin of hers. "I hear in the villages, among the boats," she said. "Even, they pay a man for having a baby. His wife, I mean, yes."

Bill Mayor frowned over the news, shook his too-long hair back from his forehead and went on with rigging the body brace out of canvas and fishing line. There was a fire in his haggard eyes, and it was in his soul, too. He had lost ten days, and back there in Metropolis, Kildering and Summers—harassed John Miller! Counting on him, fighting a desperate battle in hope that he could get through. And he was failing them.

"Tricks," he said raspingly. "Tricks, to keep the people quiet. So he can rob them! He killed twenty-five thousand people there in one night!"

Jan Posk's eyes were gloomy. "Iss the plague."

Mayor's head snapped up. "It was murder!"

"So!" Jan Posk nodded. "Things like that have happened in the old country. Here, she iss new."

Mayor stared at him, and the fire within him grew to a great leaping flame. Not here in America—

"Help me with this strap, Jan," he said.

Jan Posk took the pipe from between his teeth. His voice was deep, rolling. "Hi! Lila!"

Between them, they strapped Bill Mayor tightly in his brace. He set his teeth, sweating with the pain. He got on his feet. With an oar for a brace, he could stand.

"Tomorrow"—he pushed the words out, panting—"you must put me ashore near the highway to Capital City."

Lila pursed up her smiling lips. "Maybe the day after," she said.

Mayor said, violently, "Tomorrow!"

It was the day after the next that they put him ashore. He had a peeled staff of willow in his fist and he needed it. His clothing was a pair of worn overalls and a shirt; tennis shoes for his feet. His black hair was too long, but he was shaven. Lila had done that.

Bill Mayor stood beside the road that ran close to the river here. He leaned both hands on the willow staff and just the effort of standing there was torment, but he smiled. He meant that smile.

"You've been damned good to me, Jan and Lila," he said. "Maybe I'll make it up to you some day."

Lila smiled, lifted her shoulder. "Iss nothing, brother," she said.

Jan Posk took out his pipe to spit. "So, maybe anodder time we throw you back!"

Bill Mayor walked off along the road. His steps dragged and motorists stared at him curiously and did not stop. He had to rest after a half mile. The next time, he made only half that distance. The sweat stood out on his gaunt temples. He drove his flagging body on. It was night when he made the first village, five miles along the two-hundred-mile march to Capital City.

He had brought some money along with him, pinned to the waistband of his shorts; that and his F. B. I. credentials were his only possessions. He dared not use the credentials. He bought cheap clothing and shoes, and he had two dollars left. But the clothing was necessary. Without it, he could never reach any official. He set out again with

his willow staff, and luck was with him. At ten o'clock, he got a lift twenty miles upon his way. At three that afternoon, a man in a decrepit car slowed down beside him.

"Can I give you a lift, brother?" he cried. "Inasmuch as ye do it to the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me."

Mayor climbed painfully into the front seat, thrust his staff into the back.

"Going far?" he asked faintly.

"Going to kingdom come!" the man cried joyously. "Capital City the first stop! I'm going to preach the new coming, brother. The new and happy coming, when mankind will be free. It is already upon us! Yeah, the wicked have been smitten with a staff of serpents, and salvation is at hand!"

Mayor turned his head slowly, and the hatred that rose within him was cold and frightening. He knew an elation that Capital City was at last within his grasp, but there was menace in this innocent-seeming man. The menace of propaganda!

"You come from Metropolis," Mayor said slowly.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory!" the man chanted. He had his foot down hard on the accelerator. The car rocked and roared, and made thirty-five miles an hour.

Mayor's voice softened. "Tell me about it," he said.

The story was long in coming, interlarded with biblical ejaculations. As the itinerant preacher told it, Metropolis was the promised land. There, all men were free. Purged of wickedness by the plague, they had turned to the One True God. To the Master!

"Has anyone seen the Master?" Mayor asked sharply.

"Has anyone seen the face of the Lord?" the preacher cried. "Yeah, *he* came to me in the night. *He* came in golden light, and *his* face was a face of beauty! Oh, *he* sent unto me an angel—"

"What color was his hair?" Mayor cut in. "His eyes? How tall was he and how was he dressed?"

"Bless you, brother!" cried the preacher. "He wasn't dressed at all, and he carried in his right hand a sword of flame, and in his left hand was—"

But Mayor wasn't listening. There was no sense in this man, and yet he brought certain ominous word. It was true that men were being paid to attend schools, and women, too. *Propaganda agencies,* Mayor

thought. And men were being paid to march, too; drilling in the wide parks of Metropolis. *An army forming!*

"No man wants for anything," the preacher cried. "Lo, *he* strikes the rock, and water gushes forth, and *he* feeds the multitude from but five loaves and two fishes. There is no longer any money, or need for money. All, all has been rendered unto Cæsar, and all men live in the bounty of God!"

Mayor thought, *"So John Miller has all the money in Metropolis now!"*

"Doesn't anybody even work?" he asked.

"Aye, they work, and the work is blessed—"

It went on like that. A long while before Mayor learned that O'Shea had been murdered in his home; that fire had consumed the building "for his wickedness."

"Doesn't anyone at all oppose this—Master?" he asked then, wondering if Kildering had struck at O'Shea.

The preacher scowled, and anger flashed in his eyes. "All good men are persecuted," he said harshly. "There be those who would crucify *him,* but *he* will triumph, for *he* is great—"

"Who works against him?" Mayor cut in.

"Nay, Beelzebub," the preacher muttered.

Bill Mayor closed his eyes in weariness and tried to rest his strained and tormented back against the cushions. The preacher's voice ran on in his ears, but he scarcely heard the man. He had the facts now. Someone—and he almost prayed aloud that it was Kildering—was still working against John Miller! But John Miller was shrewd. He had lulled the people while he robbed them. Plain enough now why he had killed all those men and women: to bring the city to its knees.

One thought was terribly plain to Bill Mayor in that moment. John Miller was all-powerful in Metropolis. He had stripped the city bare.

But John Miller was not satisfied!

This preacher had been sent out to help spread the propaganda of John Miller, and that meant Capital City was next! Capital City, decimated by the Blue Death; brought to its knees! The whole State of Wichinois would follow, and then—

Bill Mayor was no longer relaxed against the cushions. He sat bolt-upright, and leaned forward, and his gaunt, bony fists were mallets on his knees. The preacher was howling a hymn now at the top of his

voice. The car roared and steamed—and the miles crawled toward them, limped out under the wabbling wheels.

It was midnight when the battered car rolled into the streets of Capital City. Bill Mayor knew where he was going. Hoarsely, he stopped the preacher two blocks from where the governor's red brick mansion stood among the ancient cedars and poplars of the Capital Park.

"Come with me, brother," the preacher boomed. "Come, and win salvation! Help me preach The Coming!"

Bill Mayor said grimly: "I'm going to preach the coming, all right. I'll spread the word my way, and you yours."

The preacher cried: "Blessings on thee, brother. The blessings of the New Lord upon thee! Let us pray!"

Bill Mayor limped off. With his gaunt, forward-thrusting head, his heavy hands set upon the staff, Bill Mayor looked a prophet himself. But it was a grim message he brought to Capital City. His lips twisted fiercely. If they would believe him! By God, he'd make them!

His eyes burned toward the multiple lights of the governor's mansion. He was on the verge of the grounds now, under the shadow of the ancient trees. He pushed on steadily, ignoring the paths, taking the shortest cut. A hundred feet ahead, there was a small illuminated fountain that hurled its multiple jets through waves of colored light. A policeman's broad shoulders bulked against it. He was spinning his club.

Mayor started to make a circuit, but his movements were too awkward to escape notice. He would have to go straight past the man. If the cop tried to stop him— Mayor's hands knotted on the staff of willow. He shuffled on, fighting the pain in his back.

He was fifty feet away when the man stopped twirling his club. The nightstick dangled by its cord from his hand, and the man twisted his head stiffly as if his collar were too tight. He reached up a slow hand toward it. Suddenly, he was tearing at his collar with both mad hands! His legs were braced widely, but his knees gave. He pitched down, scrambling on the earth. He tried to cry out, and the sound was hoarse and strangled.

Mayor tried to run. The effort wasn't very successful. He reeled, off balance, into a tree, and the pain made the perspiration start over his body. After that, he clung to his staff and contented himself with a rapid shuffle. The policeman's struggles were slowing. He lay flat on his

back, and his arms and legs stretched out limply. His breath made a hoarse sound in his throat.

It was when Mayor was still four yards away that even this sound ceased. The man's face—

Mayor said thickly: *"God! The Blue Death is here, too!"*

Through the long moment of realization, Bill Mayor stood motionless over the body, a scarecrow figure clinging to a staff. Presently, he stooped and took the man's revolver. He thrust it into his belt, beneath the swing of his coat. He shuffled on toward the mansion. The tap of his staff was quick, hurried. He leaned forward in the frantic need for haste. He passed two more bodies in the park.

As Bill Mayor fought his way up the broad steps to the mansion, the doors flung open. A man ran out. He ran crazily, with his head arched far back, his legs striding high and blindly. He stumbled at the head of the steps and pitched headlong. His shoulder struck. He bounced. He slithered headfirst, on his back, past Mayor on the steps. His face was blue.

Mayor's face was a ghastly white. His shadowed eyes had a feverish burn. The door swung open when he reached it, and he shambled inside. There was a dead man there, and another at the door of the governor's office.

Whoever was inside wasn't dead yet. It was awful to hear a grown man giggling.

Mayor poked at the door with his staff. It swung open slowly. The hinges made a faint creaking. The door swung halfway and stopped with a soft bump. A man's arm, a man's knotted fist thrust out from behind. There was no movement.

There was a living man in the room. He crouched in a corner, and thrust his beautifully manicured hands at his drooling mouth. That didn't stop the giggles. His eyes were sly, preternaturally bright.

"Are you . . . the Master?" he mumbled. "Nice old Master. Nice Master, go away. Don't hurt me."

He giggled again.

It was the governor of Wichinois.

Bill Mayor felt horror crawl sickly through his belly. He made his way heavily into the office and sank into the governor's chair. His eyes rested shrinkingly on the governor himself as he reached for the phone.

They would believe him now in Washington. John Miller had over-

shot himself that much. Mayor's thoughts moved his lips visibly. He lifted the phone to his ear, and the operator answered. He opened his mouth to give the number that was in his mind, the number of the F. B. I., and suddenly he cried out. He slammed the telephone back into its cradle.

"No," he whispered. "No—"

There was no new sound in the room, no new movement. It was at his thoughts that Bill Mayor stared with such terror. If he called Washington, if he directed John Miller's attention that way, the Blue Death might go there, too! And John Miller would send his "angel with a flaming sword."

In his corner, the governor giggled fawningly. "Nice Master. You won't hurt me?"

When Bill Mayor reached for the telephone again, his hand was rock-steady. "Get me the adjutant general of the State. At once! This is an emergency!"

When the petulant voice of the adjutant general of the State answered, Mayor rang out words like blows of steel.

"Call out the entire State militia, at once! Then come to the governor's mansion!" he said. "Yes, the written authority is waiting here for you!"

Bill Mayor hung up the receiver, and his hand went to the gun at his waist. There was a grim, cold smile on his mouth. He settled his shoulders against the back of the chair and waited. He had a plan he thought would work. Useless to talk of a one-man domination of Metropolis, or repeat Kildering's theories of John Miller. This was a Republican State; and the head of the State militia was certain to be a Redbaiter. His course, then, was clear. He would paint the things that had happened in Metropolis as a Communistic revolution!

If that failed, he still had his written authority—Bill Mayor drew out the policeman's revolver and checked the loading.

It was only minutes later that the adjutant general, Beverley Ley, strode into the office. His heavy, mustached face was belligerent.

"What the hell goes on here?" he demanded harshly.

Bill Mayor tossed his badge and credentials on the desk. "I'll tell you about it," he said quietly. "You no doubt recognized the dead people as victims of the Blue Death, which originated in Metropolis?"

Ley grunted. "The Blue Death, huh? But, in God's name, the governor!"

The governor scuttled toward General Ley, clung to him. "Don't let them hurt me, Bev," he whimpered. "Please don't let them hurt me!"

Ley grew white at the touch of the governor's hands, but stood rigidly. His eyes went to Mayor's face, and they were shocked.

"What goes on is this," Mayor said quietly. "In Metropolis, a revolution has been started. They spread the Blue Death to disorganize the city. They have seized the government and all the banks. All factories and property have been confiscated. They even have a new religion!"

Ley said: "Communists! By God!"

"And now," Mayor went on softly, "they obviously are going to try to take over the State government as well. That is why they have . . . done this to the governor. That's why the Blue Death is striking here!"

The governor whispered, "I don't want to die!"

Mayor nodded crisply. "It is a great chance for a strong man," he said. "A strong man, who put down this rebellion, might even become the country's next president. The governor is plainly incapable of issuing orders."

General Ley's eyes glistened. "The soldiers will be ready in twelve hours, fully mobilized," he said. "Meantime, I can marshal the State police. The lieutenant governor is a weakling. I'll force him to give me authority! Communists, pah!"

"Why bother?" Mayor asked softly. "The governor is still here. He will sign the authorization. We can take him with us."

Ley smiled wintrily. "Excellent!"

It was noon the next day when the troops rolled out of Capital City in commandeered trucks. Mayor, with the governor and General Ley, rode in a big sedan. They were forced to leave the State police behind, for the Blue Death was beginning to wreak its havoc. Less swift than it had been in Metropolis, it had struck down only a thousand persons in the course of the night. But the citizens were terrified. Streams of them clouded the roads northward, and had to be turned back by guards. It was the story of Metropolis over again, but Mayor felt the stirrings of hope. John Miller would not be able to stand against an

armed force! The people would be forced to hunt him down and surrender him—

Ten miles from the environs of Metropolis, the army was deployed. Marching patrols spread out through the fields and made contact with other forces that had approached on parallel roads. Scouting detachments were sent racing ahead toward Metropolis. Mayor conceded to himself that General Ley was efficient.

They took over a farmhouse as headquarters and the signal corps rapidly struck up field telephones for communications. Ley had taken on stature in the last few hours. In uniform, he seemed taller. His voice was curt, crisp, and that shine of eagerness remained in his eyes.

"Within three hours, our lines will be complete," he told Mayor. "Then we will summon them to surrender. If they refuse"—his head lifted, his voice took on a rasp—"we'll smash them!"

Mayor said happily: "Three hours? I think we've earned a bit of rest. This back of mine—" He pushed himself to his feet. He still needed the staff, and he stumped toward the first-floor room that had been assigned to him. General Ley wasn't watching or listening. He didn't seem to need sleep, under the stimulation of action. He crossed with his heavy, military stride to where a map was spread upon a portable table and frowned down at it.

Mayor eased himself down upon the bed, stood the willow staff against the wall, and stretched out. His eyes burned wide open at the darkened ceiling. A trapezoid of light from the main room lay across the wide dark boards of the floor. Mayor thought, "Three hours!"

Even if there were no surrender, Kildering and Summers would be on the alert within the city. This, if anything, should force John Miller out into the open. He thought that Kildering would be able to capitalize on that fact!

Mayor smiled and closed his eyes. His strength was depleted, and he was very tired. He slept.

It was the sound of a footfall that awakened him. His eyes flew wide and he had, suddenly, all his faculties about him. He felt that he needed them. There was, in the coldness that ran along his spine, a very real sense of danger.

General Ley stood in the doorway, looking at him.

There was no new light in the room. Ley's shadow spread along the

floor toward him. He was more rigidly erect than ever; the upfling of his head was challenging.

He had a gun in his right hand.

Mayor made no sudden movement, but his left hand drifted down to the revolver which was thrust into his waistband, while his right glided toward the willow staff against the wall.

"Are the three hours up, General Ley?" he asked quietly. "I must have slept."

General Ley said, *"You traitor!"* His voice rasped.

Mayor swore under his breath, but still he did not try to move. Ley's gun arm was too stiffly ready.

"Traitor to what, General Ley?" he asked.

Ley took a long stride inside the room, a little to one side so that the light reflected more brightly from the floor. Now, Mayor could catch the gleam of Ley's eyes. There was a glitter beneath his mustache. His lips were drawn back from his teeth.

Ley's voice came thickly, harshly. "You almost drove me into a betrayal of my Lord!" he cried. "You treacherous animal! Making me a traitor to my Lord!"

Mayor's breath made a small hissing sound between his teeth. He needed no more than those few swift words. He had been a fool to sleep. In that brief while, John Miller had sprung his defense. Dizzily, Mayor recalled the preacher's words. "An angel of the Lord appeared before me—" Yes, Ley would obey an "angel."

Ley swore in a thin, rising voice. "Die, traitor!" he shouted, and jerked up his revolver!

Mayor whipped the willow staff from the wall and hurled it straight at Ley's face! The general dodged and his gun spat out its scarlet funnel of flame. The bullet crunched into the headboard within a few inches of Mayor's head!

Mayor flung himself sideways from the bed. He cried out at the stab of pain through his back. He thrust at the floor, couldn't rise. His back brace had slipped. He flung himself forward along the floor toward Ley.

The general sprang toward the bed, leaned over it. He was directly over Mayor. The bed protected Ley from attack. Mayor tried to roll under it and there wasn't room; wasn't time. Ley's face, thrust into the shaft of light, had a curiously exalted expression.

"Die!" he cried again, and leveled the revolver at point-blank range.

Mayor's revolver spoke first.

Ley's head was driven back out of the path of the light. His left hand, resting on the footboard, caught the full focus. It clenched slowly, as if the fingers would dig into the wood. That was all that was visible of General Ley, that clenched hand and the sleeve of his uniform.

The fingers went limp, and there was a double thud as his knees struck the floor. He fell, rolled. Flat on his back, his head thrust out into the shaft of light.

Mayor's bullet had struck him just above the eyes, dead center.

Frenziedly, Mayor dragged himself to his feet. Gripping the footboard, he reached out a trembling foot for his willow staff. He finally got it. Clinging to the staff desperately, he shuffled toward the door. The revolver dangled from his fingers.

In moments, the sentries would come. He had to think fast. There must be a way to muster these men and launch them against Metropolis. It had been a mistake to wait, a mistake he should not have made. John Miller knew too well how to take advantage of such delays!

Mayor dragged across the main room of the farmhouse. No one stirred. There was no sound in the night except, distantly, the roar of a truck engine. The thrust of the night wind touched the open door of the house, made it swing gently. Insects whirred and buzzed around the electric light.

Mayor stumbled on toward the door. A harder thrust of the wind swung the door about, and the light moved with it. A man's shoe, a putteed leg came into sight. Mayor swore, shouldered the door all the way open.

He whispered, "The Blue Death!"

He went outside, leaned his shoulders against the side of the house. The wind ruffled the hair of the dead soldier at his feet. In the fields, frogs made a shrill piping. The engine of the truck was louder. As he watched, its headlights poked over the crest of a hill toward Metropolis. They dazzled him for a moment, then dropped down across the fields.

Strong black shadows sprang up there—and there were white splotches that were the faces of dead soldiers. The headlights swung back to the road; the motor bellowed. The truck blasted off at top speed toward Capital City.

Mayor's dazed eyes followed the retreating taillight until it popped out of sight over another low hill. His head sagged, and the stiffening went out of his body.

This move, too, had broken against the might of John Miller!

But it was more than that. Mayor's tired mind quested on. New armies could be raised; Metropolis could be bombed off the face of the earth. What good would that do? One man, John Miller, need merely flee and, presently, when he was ready, loose his resistless forces again upon the world.

If, indeed, John Miller waited for the bombers to come. It was so easy, so pitifully easy, for him to loose his powers. Generals turned to converts under the very walls of his city. The governor turned into a helpless madman.

It would be worse than useless to notify Washington and urge an invasion. It would be criminal folly!

So far, John Miller had not attacked Washington, except to remove the chief! Bill Mayor felt a mad urge to drop down on his knees and pray that John Miller would be content to leave Washington alone! And prayer was a thing that Bill Mayor had not thought of in many long years.

Bill Mayor's head lifted slowly, swung about so that he could see the glow of the lights of Metropolis there against the southern sky. His lips drew thinly against his teeth, turned down harshly at the corners.

That was where the battle must be fought, within the environs of Metropolis! There, they must win—or John Miller would reign triumphant over a prostrate nation!

It had been tried, and Walter Kildering himself had acknowledged defeat. No matter. They must fight on, as long as John Miller allowed them!

Bill Mayor clutched his willow staff in his hands and shuffled his dragging feet forward. There was no hope in him, only desperation and a grim, stricken courage.

Bill Mayor marched, alone, upon Metropolis.

VIII

It was not long after dawn that Bill Mayor hobbled up to the picket line around Metropolis, maintained by the police of the city—by John Miller's men.

A dozen feet from them, Bill Mayor paused and lifted his thin, long hands high above his head, lifted the staff, too.

"May the blessings of the Lord descend upon thee!" He made his voice deep and resonant. "I have seen *his* star in the east, and have come to worship *him!*"

He dropped on his knees then, and bowed his head above his clasped hands. He had purposely drawn his ruffled black hair forward over his brows. Through it, his masked eyes regarded the sentries. They had called out the sergeant of the guard now, and he stood, fists on his hips, watching Mayor. Presently, Mayor heaved himself to his feet. Leaning on his staff, he moved toward the guards.

If they were as fanatic about John Miller as most of the persons he had met lately, they would swallow this gag completely. It was the only way that Mayor, crippled as he was, could hope to break through the careful patrol they maintained.

Mayor made his eyes wide and staring. He mumbled as he moved toward them, and his head was lifted devoutly. He plodded with his staff.

"Hold on there," the sergeant growled at him.

"Peace unto you, brother," Mayor intoned. "Take me unto the house of the Lord, so that I may prophesy."

He focused his eyes upon the sergeant, lifted his staff gravely to press it against his forehead.

"I foresee that you shall be great," he said slowly. "But that man beside you—" Mayor shook his head. "Death is reaching for you, brother. Make your peace with the Lord!"

The man's face turned pale, but the sergeant grinned. "He's harmless. Let him in. We got orders to go easy on these nuts. Good propaganda, you know. Before long, anyhow, the boss is going to have visiting delegations coming here—to see how we do it. Pass in, father."

Mayor intoned his blessing again and went, long-striding, through the picket lines of Metropolis. But his heart was not light. The very ease with which he had been allowed to enter spoke eloquently of the growing power of John Miller. His lips twisted bitterly. Well, he had reason to know how great that power was!

It took him a long while to reach the city itself. From the first public phone that he could locate, he put in a call for "Mr. Walters."

The operator said: "I'm sorry, sir. Nobody here by that name."

He tried the cottage on the hill, and the phone had been disconnected; tried their old office on Berger Street with no better luck. He leaned against the wall of the booth and stared blankly at the phone. This was the method of rendezvous that had been arranged, and it had been disrupted. He was in Metropolis, but he was alone!

For the first time, he was shaken by serious fears for the lives of Summers and Kildering. Somehow, he had not thought that even the power of John Miller could prevail against old Frozen-face.

Mayor pushed out of the booth and made his slow way along the main streets toward the Civic Center with its surrounding parks. There was no plan in his brain, only a vast weariness and despair. This was the final, crushing blow.

John Miller was triumphant.

Slowly, Mayor began to look about him. People went about the rounds of their business as usual, with no thought of the catastrophe that had overtaken them, which threatened their entire civilization. They even seemed happy. There was a school on the corner and, in addition to the children, there were great crowds of men and women filing into the building also. Most of them carried books.

Mayor remembered that John Miller paid adults to study. Propaganda, of course.

And Mayor realized that he was hungry. He turned into a lunchroom, and his hand went hesitantly to his pocket. He had less than a dollar in change. But he had to eat. He limped into the lunchroom and settled upon a stool, heavily. He leaned his willow staff against the wall, glanced at the signs.

"Ham and eggs, with potatoes and coffee, bread and butter," he read, and then he frowned. The price was "1/10 SU," whatever that meant.

The counterman was smiling at him, waiting. Mayor said: "I'm a stranger here. What does one tenth SU mean? I have money, but—"

"A stranger?" The man still grinned. "Oh, that means a tenth of a service unit. The bank over on the corner will give you exchange. I'll do it for you. Ham and eggs?"

Mayor watched the man, whistling cheerfully as he went about fixing his breakfast. He broke off, to talk over his shoulder.

"We don't have money here any more, and it's pretty swell," he said. "The State pays me to run this lunchroom, and I get half of any economies I show. They finance it. In service units."

"The State?" Mayor asked slowly.

"Metropolis," the man threw at him. "I get paid for studying radio. Now, there's something I've always wanted to know about, but it cost too much. Besides, most of those courses were fakes. Now, they pay me to learn it. My wife's got a course in taking care of babies. They decided we could have four."

"Four babies?"

"Yep, and they pay us for each one—keep on paying us. Pretty swell, huh?"

Mayor's lips shut grimly together. Pretty swell! John Miller taking all the money in the entire city, setting out to take all of it in the State. Meantime, he lulled these people into false security.

"And suppose the State decided you couldn't have any babies?" Mayor asked softly. "What then?"

The man turned around, sliding a plate toward Mayor. "Don't know," he said. "Everybody has to take an F. and M. and they give you a card."

"An F. and M.?"

"Sure. Physical and mental test." The man was still cheerful. Mayor was growing to hate that cheerfulness. "You step into some sort of room with funny lights and gadgets. Just walk through it. When you come out, they give you a card. They do say that if your card is bad, it just isn't any use trying to have kids. You can't. Look, mister. There's no need for anybody in this town to do without money. You go to City Hall, and they'll give you a place to live. You stay there six months, it's yours. They'll assign you a job, too. And you get paid for studying, like I said. Or marching. Or taking exercise. They got home-crafts, too. They're compulsory, but you get paid big, and you make your own choice."

Mayor said shortly, "Have you found out where the money is coming from to pay for all this?"

The man nodded. "Oh, sure. We get lessons in that, too. Newspapers carried a series on it. It goes like this: When we study, or have kids, or do any of those things, we're doing a service to the State, so we get paid for it. These ham and eggs, now. Used to cost a lot, because so many guys took a profit out of it. Now each guy gets just what his service is worth. Farmer, distributor, me. Same thing with everything. Nobody gets any profits. Take these ham and eggs. What you

paid was just what they was worth. I get my cut, the distributor, the farmer. State finances the whole deal and arranges the details."

Mayor felt shaken. If it would work— But it was all trickery. John Miller was entrenching himself so that his grafting wouldn't be interrupted.

"What about the interest on the farmer's mortgage?" he asked dryly. "What about the profits of the stockholder in the concern?"

The man shrugged. "State owns them all. Farmer owns his land. Interest is against the law. You know, that's a funny thing. I always sort of figured interest was screwy. Like as if money worked and had to be paid for working. There's only so much money in all. All right. Suppose it all earns money, interest, like that. Where you going to get the money to pay the other money for working? It's screwy. Me, I like service units. Want anything else, mister?"

Mayor gave the man a dime, which was all he wanted. He got up and shuffled toward the door. The counterman called out after him.

"Hey, if you're sick, whyn't you go to the hospital?" he said. "They pay you for coming. Keeping healthy is a service to the State."

Mayor stepped out into the street, and the sun was bright and warm. It felt good on his shoulders. He lifted his head and looked heavily about him. There were a lot of people in the parks, taking exercises in groups, playing games, marching in columns.

"But John Miller is a murderer," Mayor muttered. "He killed twenty-five thousand of these people in one night. He's a revolutionist, a traitor. This scheme won't work. It's camouflage so that John Miller can loot the entire city. He'll walk out, and the entire social system will be disorganized. The whole place will be ripe for any kind of revolution. Maybe that's what he wants. Maybe he's a revolutionist of some sort."

He stood there on the sunny street, and he could not get his thoughts straight. He looked back at the lunchroom, and the operator was standing in the door, smiling.

"Pretty picture, ain't it?" he said. "Looks like Metropolis always comes up better than ever. Take those fires, now—"

Mayor said sharply: "What about initiative? What about efficiency? It's all right to talk about service units and no profits, but what are you working for?"

The man shook his head. "You got it wrong. All any guy ever works

for is to live. Me, I'm living better than I ever did before. And if I run this place right, I got a chance to go up. Run three or four, maybe. If I'm good enough, I'll get a State job managing all of them. And more service units. Guy gets just what he's worth. But no guy can take a whole lot of money and smash another guy who hasn't got much. No rich guy can start crowding everybody else out of business."

"Your taxes will be high!"

The man laughed. "You're hard to sell, mister. Ain't no taxes. State puts a charge for its services on everything that's sold. Management charge. State pays itself in service units. Well, so long; I got a customer. Better go to that hospital, mister."

Mayor tramped toward the park, and his lips were grim. It sounded pretty, but so did Fascism and Communism and lots of other isms, as the propaganda told it. And this man had swallowed propaganda wholesale. He was paid to learn it by heart!

But Bill Mayor was an F. B. I. man, with a job to do; a mass murderer to catch.

There was a man standing on a bench in the park making a speech. He was using a lot of biblical language and calling Metropolis the Promised Land. He was talking about the Second Coming. About the New Lord.

Mayor listened to him, and felt his anger rising. He was too feeble to fight with his body. He was stripped of allies and friends. But he could still fight with words.

He climbed up on another bench and lifted his gaunt arms, his willow staff toward the skies. He knew how haggard he looked, and that was well. He made a good prophet.

"You fools!" he cried out. "You utter idiots! Will you kiss the hand that kills your brothers and fathers?"

Mayor got attention all right. The other speaker stared at him, open-mouthed. The people swung about. Men, playing baseball nearby, heard the deep bell of his voice and turned to peer toward the tall, bushy-haired man with a prophet's staff in his lifted hand.

Mayor looked at the men about him, and slowly dropped his hands. "How many of you," he said slowly, "lost loved ones and friends by the Blue Death? Lift your hand, any man who didn't lose some dear one through the Blue Death!"

In all the crowd before him, no hand was lifted. The people in the crowd glanced at each other uneasily.

"The man you are praising," Mayor said slowly. "The man you call the New Lord. He loosed the Blue Death upon you, as God once loosed the plagues upon Egypt. Do you know why?"

Mayor had never done much speaking in public before. But he felt deeply. He was carried away by his anger and his helplessness. And he had these people. He could feel their response to him. He shook the staff.

"He thought these people you love were too dumb to live!" he cried. "That was the whole thing. The Blue Death was aimed at people whom this man—this *man,* I say—did not deem smart enough to live! This is the same man who tells you that you are too dumb to have children. You walk into a room full of lights. If the machine says you're dumb, you can't have children. You can't ever have a child anywhere. Do you know why?

"Those machines sterilize you!"

The other speaker jumped down from his bench and strode through the ranks of the crowd. "You are a blasphemer!" he shouted. "You blaspheme the name of the Master!"

Mayor laughed. It was harsh and reaching, his laughter. More men were gravitating toward the bench from which he spoke. Women were stopping, too. He had a considerable crowd. He laughed and jeered down at the man who had challenged him.

"So the Master wants to suppress the truth!" he said. "If you know the truth, tell it to these people! Didn't this man, whom you call the Master, loose the Blue Death on the city?"

The preacher said, "You blaspheme!"

"Answer my question! But you can't answer it!" Mayor shouted. "You can't answer it, except to say it is the truth. For I have told the truth!"

The man looked uneasily about him. "It was done for the good of the whole people!" he cried. "For the good of the State!"

Mayor shouted him down. "For the good of the man you serve!" he cried. "To line his pockets with your money, with your wealth! Outside of Metropolis, you couldn't buy a gallon of gasoline, nor a ham sandwich. You can't spend service units anywhere else. And when the Master skips with your money, *what will you live on then?"*

The speaker turned away and began to make his way rapidly through the crowd. A woman snatched off his hat and hit at him with it. A man caught his coat collar, shouted a question. The man ripped free and began to run.

"Let him go!" Mayor called. "He is only a servant! Listen, listen to what I have to tell you!"

Just behind Mayor, a voice spoke softly. "Good work, Bill, but cut it short. The cops will be here in a minute."

Mayor stiffened. He knew that voice—*Marty Summers!* He did not turn, but his words came out more hurriedly.

"Stop taking these things that happen about you as the acts or dictates of God," he said. "I tell you that they are the works of a man, a man named John Miller. He had a criminal record. He is a robber of banks, a murderer! Ask questions. Ask yourself questions. Ask your neighbors. You have no security, and no freedom, except to do as this man orders!

"This is not the Promised Land. It is a promissory land. You have given your whole wealth, your whole security and future for scraps of paper that have no value at all. You are slaves to a man named Miller!

"This is America! This is the land of free speech, of free religion—*of free men!*

"Then act like free men! Throw off the chains of John Miller!"

Behind him, Summers whispered, "Here come the cops!"

Mayor lifted his staff and pointed where two men in police blue were hurrying through the walks of the park. "There, you see your freedom!" he said. "I dare to speak the truth, and the minions of John Miller come to destroy me! Judge by that, whether I speak the truth!"

He climbed down painfully from the bench, and Summers hurried him into the shubbery that grew thickly against the wall of the park. He felt Summers' hand, warmly tight about his arm; the pain that racked him in his urgent need for haste did not touch him.

"Golly, I'm glad to see you!" Summers whispered. "Kildering and I thought you had been shot, trying to jump in the river. Hurry. I've got a car over the wall!"

Mayor's face was white, streaked with sweat. "I did get shot," he said harshly. "Take it easy, man!"

Summers shook his head. "You can't delay. The cops are right behind us. Come on, over the wall! I'll lift you!"

Mayor glanced toward Summers then, for the first time, and his eyes widened with shock. Summers' youthfulness was gone from his face. His cheeks were drawn and gaunt, and he had a pallor that matched Mayor's own. There was a twitching at his mouth corner, and his eyes were shadowed.

There was no time for talk then, and Mayor struggled over the wall with Summers' help, stumbled into the car. Instantly, Summers had the engine roaring. They swept into a howling turn, then into a side street. A gun blasted out behind them, and a police whistle screamed. Then the sound was lost. Summers drove grimly, bent over the wheel. He was fumbling in his inside coat pocket, and he dumped a leather case on the seat.

"Give yourself a shot with that needle," Summers said, and his voice sounded strained.

Mayor opened the case slowly, looked down at a hypodermic, whose barrel already held fluid.

"What the hell?" he demanded.

"Morphine," Summers explained shortly. "Knock yourself out quickly, or it will be too late. As soon as John Miller hears of this, he'll set himself to drive you crazy. It isn't hard. All he has to do is think about it for a while. Morphine knocks out the conscious mind, nullifies the attack!"

Mayor fingered the hypodermic needle, deliberately rolled back his left sleeve. "So that's what's wrong with you, is it?" he asked somberly.

Summers' eyes glistened as they rolled toward the needle. He tongued his lips, and his mouth twitched more violently.

"Shoot yourself!" he ordered harshly. "Yes, that's what's wrong with me. Try shooting yourself with morphine two and three times a day for weeks. Damn it, Mayor—"

Bill Mayor jabbed the needle home, pressed down the plunger slowly. His own face was, suddenly, more haggard.

"And Kildering?" he asked slowly.

"Kildering isn't human," Summers said heavily. "He's damned near a superman himself, the way he stands it. He . . . he never seems to sleep. Fill the needle again, Mayor, before you pass out. There's a vial there." He sighed. "Kildering saw the angel with the flaming sword face to face, with morphine already in him, but it didn't faze Kildering. That was when we murdered the mayor."

Mayor said shortly: "Miller had got to O'Shea, eh? I had to kill the commander of those troops out there. I heard about O'Shea. His home burned down, didn't it?"

"Kildering did that, too," he said. "Knocked me out to save me from the angel. Gambled on my recovering in time to carry him out before we were burned up alive. I had on a police uniform. Walked right through twenty cops with Kildering over my shoulder," Summers shook his head. "Kildering's arm hasn't been right since then, though. It's not healing as quickly as it should."

Mayor refilled the needle, put it away in its case and shoved it into Marty's inside pocket. His brain, for the moment, felt extraordinarily clear. The pain in his back was less.

"We can lick John Miller," he said steadily. "The three of us just got to keep preaching the truth. Get enough people stirred up, they'll throw off John Miller themselves."

Summers whipped around a corner on two wheels, cut through a narrow alley and doubled back the way he had come. "You can't throw off a man who doesn't seem even to exist," he said heavily. "They worship him in the churches here. We found his harem."

"By God!" Mayor cried. "Then we've got him!"

Marty smiled faintly. "It isn't that kind of harem," he said quietly. "It's a very efficient private hospital for the girls and women whom John Miller selects. He's not a libertine, Bill. He just wants to produce as many children as possible, so there'll be more supermen."

"More supermen!" Mayor said dully. "But, good God, we can't go around killing babies!"

Mayor's mind was clouding. The pulsing roar of the motor lulled his senses.

Summers' mouth twitched. It was strangely like the grimace of Walter Kildering. "John Miller does, though," he said. "Miller kills all of his sons and daughters that don't come up to his standard. Don't know just how. Just looks at them, they say, and they die. We set a trap at the hospital one night, and John Miller almost got us. He was smart. Sent his madness to us, *before* he came there. We just managed to guess what was happening and take our shots in time. That's why we keep the needles charged now."

Mayor lolled back on the cushions and the pulsing roar of the motor moved inside of him. He was asleep.

Marty Summers looked at him and there was commiseration in his hollow eyes. "You poor devil," he said, "why in hell didn't you stay away?"

Mayor stirred a little. His fist knotted slowly. "John Miller!" he said. "Gotta destroy John Miller before he—"

He slumped back, and Summers sucked in a quivering sigh. He looked nervously about him. John Miller was working on Mayor now. If Miller decided to tackle him, too—Summers found himself grinding down on the gas. He smiled ruefully and eased off on it. You couldn't run away from Miller. He'd just have to take a chance on it, this time. He was defiant, reckless. To hell with Miller!

There was a haunting fear in his eyes.

Summers cut in behind the cottage where they had been living for two days. It was a terrific struggle to carry Bill Mayor into the house, but he managed it. He dumped him on the bed, stripped him and bent over the wound in Mayor's back. It was pretty badly inflamed. He dressed it.

Marty had just finished that job when he heard a car slide to a halt out back, and presently heard the quiet, tired steps of Walter Kildering. He straightened, sent his low shout through the house.

"Mayor's back!" he called.

Kildering came into the room slowly. "The cops are looking for him, because of that speech in the park," he said. "I was able to identify him from the description. Besides, I was expecting him after what happened to the State army last night. He did a good job there, but it wasn't good enough."

Kildering dropped into a chair, tossed a newspaper to the bed. The headlines screamed:

ANGEL TURNS BACK ARMY!

ENTIRE FORCE WIPED OUT BY MASTER!

Kildering said heavily: "I wonder if anyone, anything, can be good enough to eliminate—John Miller."

Summers shook his head. "You can't even tell them that this 'angel' is Miller's psychic projection. They just glare at you and say, 'An angel is an angel!' Try and answer that one. Any luck?"

Kildering kneaded the hand of his broken arm. It was puffy, dry-looking. "I managed to see three big former land holders," he said. "They're willing enough to help—if there's no danger to themselves!" His voice sounded bitter. "What was Mayor's talk about in the park? The papers called it blasphemy."

Summers explained. "I think I may have hit on something, Kildering," he said slowly. "I checked up with twelve women who have lost babies. I'm pretty sure one of them knows Miller and can reach him."

Kildering's eyes sharpened. "Was she bitter?"

"No," said Summers finally.

Kildering got up and left the room. He began clattering pans in the kitchen of the house and Summers went in to help him. "Mayor should be coming around in an hour or so," he said. "That lighter shot you figured out worked on him just in time."

Kildering didn't answer. He was standing in the middle of the floor, with a frying pan in his hand. He stared at it, then moved slowly toward the stove.

"You give me that woman's name," he said curtly. "I'm going to see her."

Kildering went without waiting to eat, and Marty prepared a meal for Mayor and himself. Kildering came back just as they were sitting down to eat.

Kildering said somberly, "I think, before the night is over, that we'll see Miller!"

Mayor started to his feet, and his chair crashed to the floor. Summers' clenched fists rested on the table.

"When?" he asked harshly.

Kildering's face was grim. Color burned in his cheeks. "We'll get a call from a woman in about an hour. I'd better tell you what I did. I told this woman, whom Marty found, all about us, and how we were F. B. I. men intent on destroying John Miller. She wasn't, I discovered, interested in causing him trouble, but she was interested in doing him a favor—not that she said so.

"I told her that she need not fear the insanity or the death that Miller could send, that we had a protection against that. We have been operating here since before the Blue Death and have done a lot of things to hurt Miller. I told her what they were, and what our future plans are."

Summers said, incredulously, "Are you crazy, Kildering?"

Kildering just shook his head. "I told her what rewards she could gain, plus our protection, by telling us how to find John Miller. I insisted that we had the means to protect her against the 'angel with the flaming sword' and the insanity.

"When she tells John Miller about that, he'll believe her. He is undoubtedly aware of his failure to destroy us. Yes, I think that we can count on being led to Miller's hide-out."

Bill Mayor slumped into his chair. He said hoarsely: "You mean that you're deliberately allowing us to be led into a trap? A trap that will be set the way John Miller wants it? Good God, Kildering, this isn't an ordinary criminal you're playing with. It's . . . *it's John Miller!*"

Kildering's lips twisted. "Yes, I know. Also, it has become quite apparent that, unless John Miller wants us to find him, we will never succeed in doing it. This is the only way. To make John Miller *want* us to find him!"

"He'll destroy us!" Summers whispered it.

Kildering said: "Probably. You have a wife, Marty. Mayor, you're wounded. I'll go alone."

Mayor laughed. "You will, like hell!"

Summers was on his feet. "Listen, Kildering," he snapped. "You can't—"

Kildering leaned across the table and laid out his hand there, palm up. And he was smiling. His rare smile that could be so gentle.

"Forgive me," he said simply, "and be patient. I have so framed the information given to this woman that John Miller will be primarily interested in destroying me. He will believe that I alone know the method of protecting persons from his powers. So he will want to destroy me, first of all. If you decide, after I have finished talking, to help me, that will be your chance. You can start shooting the moment you see him. It should suffice."

Mayor said slowly, "You mean that, while he is killing you, we will kill him."

Kildering said quietly: "Something like that, though I doubt that either one of you would survive me very long in that event. A matter of precedence at the gates of hell. No more. It is the only way."

Summers echoed numbly, "Yes, the only way!" He thought for a moment of Anne, and felt a great emptiness in his chest. He said again, violently, "The only way!"

Kildering said: "The only way to destroy John Miller. But you still have the opportunity to drop out. No, let me explain."

Kildering leaned forward, rested his forehead against his hand.

"Mayor, you haven't seen much of Metropolis under Miller," he said. "It is a pretty happy place. There isn't much doubt that Miller's genius extends to government. This city is a perfect socialist State. What is more important is that it works! I don't know how much of that is attributable to John Miller's psychic powers and the religious worship with which people regard him. But it works. Now, remember that.

"John Miller destroyed the old city with fire; by psychic suggestion, he planned the new one. I can't prove it, but I'm convinced of the fact. The *modus operandi* was the same, and there was the same carelessness of human life.

"John Miller killed wholesale the lower mental stratum of life in the city. He is preventing the unfit from breeding. He has abolished banks and the banking practices which many people blame, in part, for the great depression. He has made the people happy and self-sufficient. He is educating them.

"The prisons and hospitals are empty, through his greater science."

Mayor spoke, with strain in his voice. "He is doing this to line his own pockets!"

Kildering looked up, his lips twitched. "Perhaps. I think the purpose for which he does all this is something more to be feared. Let me go on.

"The people have a large amount of freedom. I think they will have more when John Miller is secure against interference."

Mayor said violently: "You didn't see what he did to the governor of the State, to the people of Capital City, to the National Guard that was about to attack him!"

Summers said slowly, "You, Mayor, haven't seen Metropolis!"

Mayor whirled on him. "Are you defending John Miller?"

Summers' smile was faint. There was a twitching in his mouth corners and his eyes were haggard. Mayor looked at him, then caught Summers' arm.

"I'm sorry, old man. You've made a drug addict out of yourself, fighting him. Kildering—"

"Let me finish," Kildering said, and his voice was weary. "These are the things that John Miller has done. He has committed every crime in the statutes; he has violated human laws—but he has set up something like an ideal government, and the people are happy!

"You have to weigh these things at their full value, for I fully believe we hold John Miller's life in our hands."

Summers leaned forward. "What's the other side, Walter?"

Kildering started visibly at the sound of his own first name. He wasn't used to it, and for a moment his eyes were uncertain. He reached out and dropped a hand on Summers' wrist. His voice was deeper.

"The other side is simply this," he said. "It is the purpose for which John Miller is breeding so many sons and daughters."

"Purpose?" Summers' voice was vague, and his eyes were blank with inward thoughts.

"What purpose?" Mayor snapped.

Kildering's fist knotted slowly. "It's quite simple, isn't it?" he asked. "John Miller is establishing a race of supermen—to be served by the human race, as slaves!"

Mayor echoed the word blankly. His face flushed and he pitched to his feet.

"*Slaves!*" he repeated.

"Quite well cared for, probably very happy," Kildering said, "but none the less slaves. This is the purpose for which Miller builds. His violence against individuals has been passionless save when two F. B. I. men approached the mother of one of his children. She was—shall I say royalty? Then he used the 'mystery ray.' I think we can safely assume that those two comrades of ours, now dead, saw the 'angel with the flaming sword.'

"Miller will continue passionless, allowing people to worship him, destroying the unfit, spreading his perfect State over Wichinois, over the United States, over the world. The human slaves will serve and worship him!"

Mayor said hoarsely: "Good God! Even if we destroy John Miller, we can't stop that! There must be hundreds of supermen and superwomen growing among us."

Summers said thickly: "I feel a little . . . sick. Do you think Miller is attacking?"

"He'll wait," Kildering said grimly. "Mayor, you forget one thing. A mutation can't breed true until the second generation, and then only a small percentage of the inbred stock will be supermen.

"Hundreds of them scattered over Wichinois. Superman will recur among their children, but by that time the leavening of their inheritance may have lifted the human race to something more nearly approaching parity. Superman is, in any case, inevitable. With the multiplicity of X-ray and radium concentrations, mutations are bound to occur. Inevitably they will, sooner or later, assume the form of another superman. Our race must confront that as inescapable, and prepare for it."

Walter Kildering pushed himself to his feet. His bad arm was puffy and unhealthy, his face drawn as fine as platinum wire.

"There is one point I want to drive home," he said slowly. "It is more important than anything else. If you go with me, remember this: Our decision is made. John Miller must die—*but there must be not even one second's delay in shooting!*"

Mayor's eyes narrowed. "There is a reason for that?"

Kildering leaned forward. "Have you met any of the women whom John Miller has chosen?" he asked. "Have you met a man to whom the 'angel with the flaming sword' has appeared?"

Mayor said angrily, "Yes!"

"Then you understand," Kildering said, more slowly. "Men who meet John Miller worship him—*as dogs do men!*"

Kildering looked at Mayor and Summers fixedly, felt the resolution in their eyes.

"It is a thing to fear," he said finally. "We must shoot before we become—*dogs!*"

He sat down then, and his voice turned dull. "That's the whole picture, gentlemen. My own decision is made. The rest is up to you."

Mayor's lips pulled down thinly. He whipped out his revolver, swiftly checked its loading.

Summers was utterly pale. "I think we should each have two guns," he said harshly. "We don't know how many seconds we'll be able to shoot. An increased rate of fire is desirable!"

It was ridiculously easy, after all these weeks of futile battle, to trail the woman John Miller was supposed to love. The very ease of it was ominous in the extreme. The faces of the three men, in their trailing car, were pale and grim. Their eyes were a little blank, in the manner of men whose thoughts are all within themselves. But in the grimness of their set jaws, in the slow tension of all their movements their determination was written.

The woman they followed parked her car before an ordinary apartment building and went in, eagerly. Summers darted ahead and spotted the apartment to which she went.

"The second floor, a door right opposite the head of the steps," he reported.

Kildering nodded, and led the way up the stairs. Mayor hitched himself up by a violent grip upon the railing; Summers crowded close behind on the other side. So they reached the head of the steps and gazed at the door behind which they would find John Miller!

Kildering looked at Summers, held out his hand. He shook silently with Bill Mayor. There was no need for words. The men took a revolver in each fist, and that way they moved toward the door.

They were a tatterdemalion crew, these men who carried the hope of the human race in their hands. Kildering walked steadily, his head proud, his shoulders braced in a semblance of their old confidence. The sling of his broken arm was dirty, and the slash across his cheek had left a crimson, twisted scar.

On his left, Bill Mayor shuffled, and there was still the gaunt fury of a prophet about him. His long black hair was unkempt, and his bones seemed too large for his skin.

And Summers was thin and wasted. His face twitched with the jerk of drug-starved nerves. His eyes burned darkly. He seemed young again tonight, a kid bucking a game that was too tough for him. But fighting; in there, fighting.

They marched to the door like that, these three scarecrow men carrying the hope of the human race—the spirit of all the centuries to come.

Summers reached out to the door. His hand, clutching a gun, could just compass the doorknob, too. He looked at Kildering and met a nod, a slow, soft smile. He twisted the knob and threw the door wide.

The three men wedged into the apartment of John Miller. They

raced forward. One of them shouted. Or perhaps it was all three of them together. It was despair, and rage, and rare courage. Humans, going into battle.

The door vibrated and closed.

It closed, and no guns spoke. Silence—and the door did not open. Time passed—and the door did not open.

When, finally, the knob turned, it was slowly. The movement of the door, swinging wide, was a deliberate thing; ceremonious.

Walter Kildering and Bill Mayor walked out together, quietly. They looked at each other, not speaking. Their faces were still drawn, still weary, but their eyes were shining.

Summers came afterward, and his head was lifted; his teeth glistened between faintly parted lips. It was as if he listened to far-off music.

Walter Kildering pulled back his shoulders. He glanced toward the door, closed now, and touched his two comrades on the arm to move them toward the steps.

"Come on, men," he said. "Come on. We have work to do—for the Master." His voice was reverent, as men speak in the presence of their God.

The three men moved down the steps softly, pride in the carriage of their heads. Three men going downstairs, happy in the service of their master, the service of John Miller; carrying down with them the hope of the human race—the spirit of all the centuries that might have come.

Three slaves.

Destiny Times Three

BY FRITZ LEIBER

I

The ash Yggdrasil great evil suffers,
Far more than men do know;
The hart bites its top, its trunk is rotting,
And Nidhogg gnaws beneath.
Elder Edda.

IN GHOSTLY, shivering streamers of green and blue, like northern lights, the closing hues of the fourth Hoderson symchromy, called "the Yggdrasil," shuddered down toward visual silence. Once more the ancient myth, antedating even the Dawn Civilization, had been told—of the tree of life with its roots in heaven and hell and the land of the frost giants, and serpents gnawing at those roots and the gods fighting to preserve it. Transmuted into significant color by Hoderson's genius, interpreted by the world's greatest color instrumentalists, the primeval legend of cosmic dread and rottenness and mystery, of wheels within cosmic wheels, had once more enthralled its beholders.

In the grip of an unearthly excitement, Thorn crouched forward, one hand jammed against the grassy earth beyond his outspread cloak. The lean wrist shook. It burst upon him, as never before, how the Yggdrasil legend paralleled the hypothesis which Clawly and he were going to present later this night to the World Executive Committee.

More roots of reality than one, all right, and worse than serpents gnawing, if that hypothesis were true.

And no gods to oppose them—only two fumbling, overmatched men.

Thorn stole a glance at the audience scattered across the hillside. The upturned faces of utopia's sane, healthy citizenry seemed bloodless and cruel and infinitely alien. Like masks. Thorn shuddered.

A dark, stooped figure slipped between him and Clawly. In the last dying upflare of the symchromy—the last wan lightning stroke as the storm called life departed from the universe—Thorn made out a majestic, ancient face shadowed by a black hood. Its age put him in mind of a fancy he had once heard someone advance, presumably in jest—that a few men of the Dawn Civilization's twentieth century had somehow secretly survived into the present. The stranger and Clawly seemed to be conversing in earnest, low-pitched whispers.

Thorn's inward excitement reached a peak. It was as if his mind had become a thin, taut membrane, against which, from the farthest reaches of infinity, beat unknown pulses. He seemed to sense the presence of stars beyond the stars, time-streams beyond time.

The symchromy closed. There began a long moment of complete blackness. Then—

Thorn sensed what could only be described as something from a region beyond the stars beyond the stars, from an existence beyond the time-streams beyond time. A blind but purposeful fumbling that for a moment closed on him and made him its agent.

No longer his to control, his hand stole sideways, touched some soft fabric, brushed along it with infinite delicacy, slipped beneath a layer of similar fabric, closed lightly on a round, hard, smooth something about as big as a hen's egg. Then his hand came swiftly back and thrust the something into his pocket.

Gentle groundlight flooded the hillside, though hardly touching the black false-sky above. The audience burst into applause. Cloaks were waved, making the hillside a crazy sea of color. Thorn blinked stupidly. Like a flimsy but brightly painted screen switched abruptly into place, the scene around him cut off his vision of many-layered infinities. And the groping power that a moment before had commanded his movements, now vanished as suddenly as it had come, leaving

him with the realization that he had just committed an utterly unmotivated, irrational theft.

He looked around. The old man in black was already striding toward the amphitheater's rim, threading his way between applauding groups. Thorn half-withdrew from his pocket the object he had stolen. It was about two inches in diameter and of a bafflingly gray texture, neither a gem, nor a metal, nor a stone, nor an egg, though faintly suggestive of all four.

It would be easy to run after the man, to say, "You dropped this." But he didn't.

The applause became patchy, erratic, surged up again as members of the orchestra began to emerge from the pit. There was a lot of confused activity in that direction. Shouts and laughter.

A familiar sardonic voice remarked, "Quite a gaudy show they put on. Though perhaps a bit too close for comfort to our business of the evening."

Thorn became aware that Clawly was studying him speculatively. He asked, "Who was that you were talking to?"

Clawly hesitated a moment. "A psychologist I consulted some months back when I had insomnia. You remember."

Thorn nodded vaguely, stood sunk in thought. Clawly prodded him out of it with, "It's late. There are quite a few arrangements to check, and we haven't much time."

Together they started up the hillside.

Especially as a pair, they presented a striking appearance—they were such a study in similarities and contrasts. Certainly they both seemed spiritually akin to some wilder and more troubled age than safe, satisfied, wholesome utopia. Clawly was a small man, but dapper and almost dancingly lithe, with gleamingly alert, subtle features. He might have been some Borgia or Medici from that dark, glittering, twisted core of the Dawn Civilization, when by modern standards mankind was more than half insane. He looked like a small, red-haired, devil-may-care satan, harnessed for good purposes.

Thorn, on the other hand, seemed like a somewhat disheveled and reckless saint, lured by evil. His tall, gaunt frame increased the illusion. He, too, would have fitted into that history-twisted black dawn, perhaps as a Savonarola or da Vinci.

In that age they might have been the bitterest and most vindictive of enemies, but it was obvious that in this they were the most unshakably loyal of friends.

One also sensed that more than friendship linked them. Some secret, shared purpose that demanded the utmost of their abilities and put upon their shoulders crushing responsibilities.

They looked tired. Clawly's features were too nervously mobile, Thorn's eyes too darkly circled, even allowing for the shadows cast by the groundlight, which waned as the false-sky faded, became ragged, showed the stars.

They reached the amphitheater's grassy rim, walked along a row of neatly piled flying togs with distinctive luminescent monograms, spotted their own. Already members of the audience were launching like bats into the summary darkness, filling it with the faint gusty hum of subtronic power, that basic force underlying electric, magnetic, and gravitational phenomena, that titan, potentially earth-destroying power, chained for human use.

As he climbed into his flying togs, Thorn kept looking around. False-sky and groundlight had both dissolved, opening a view to the far horizon, although a little weather, kept electronically at bay for the symchromy, was beginning to drift in—thin streamers of cloud. He felt as never before a poignancy in the beauty of utopia, because he knew as never before how near it might be to disaster, how closely it was pressed upon by alien infinities. There was something spectral about the grandeur of the lonely, softly glowing skylons, lofty and distant as mountains, thrusting up from the dark rolling countryside. Those vertical, one-building cities of his people, focuses of communal activity, gleaming pegs sparsely studding the whole earth—the Mauve Z peering over the next hill, seeming to top it but actually miles away; beyond it the Gray Twins, linked by a fantastically delicate aerial bridge; off to the left the pearly finger of the Opal Cross; last, farther left, thirty miles away but jutting boldly above the curve of the earth, the mountainous Blue Lorraine—all these majestic skylons seemed to Thorn like the last pinnacles of some fairy city engulfed by a rising black tide. And the streams of flying men and women, with their softly winking identification lights, no more than fireflies doomed to drown.

His fingers adjusted the last fastening of his togs, paused there.

Clawly only said, "Well?" but there was in that one word the sense of a leave-taking from all this beauty and comfort and safety—an ultimate embarkation.

They pulled down their visors. From their feelings, it might have been Mars toward which they launched themselves—a sullen ember halfway up the sky, even now being tentatively probed by the First Interplanetary Expedition. But their actual destination was the Opal Cross.

II

Never before had the screams of nightmare been such a public problem; now the wise men almost wished they could forbid sleep in the small hours, that the shrieks of cities might less horribly disturb the pale, pitying moon as it glimmered on green waters.

Nyarlathotep, H. P. Lovecraft.

Suppressing the fatigue that surged up in him disconcertingly, Clawly rose to address the World Executive Committee. He found it less easy to suppress the feeling that had in part caused the surge of fatigue: the illusion that he was a charlatan seeking to persuade sane men of the truth of fabricated legends of the supernatural. His smile was characteristic of him—friendly, but faintly diabolic, mocking himself as well as others. Then the smile faded.

He summed up, "Well, gentlemen, you've heard the experts. And by now you've guessed why, with the exception of Thorn, they were asked to testify separately. Also, for better or worse—he grimaced grayly—"you've guessed the astounding nature of the danger which Thorn and I believe overhangs the world. You know what we want —the means for continuing our research on a vastly extended and accelerated scale, along with a program of confidential detective investigation throughout the world's citizenry. So nothing remains but to ask your verdict. There are a few points, however, which perhaps will bear stressing."

There was noncommittal silence in the Sky Room of the Opal Cross. It was a huge chamber and seemed no less huge because the ceiling was at present opaque—a great gray span arching from the World Map on the south wall to the Space Map on the north. Yet the few

men gathered in an uneven horseshoe of armchairs near the center in no way suggested political leaders seeking a prestige-enhancing background for their deliberations, but rather a group of ordinary men who for various practical reasons had chosen to meet in a ballroom. Any other group than the World Executive Committee might just as well have reserved the Sky Room. Indeed, others had danced here earlier this night, as was mutely testified by a scattering of lost gloves, scarves, and slippers, along with half-emptied glasses and other flotsam of gaiety.

Yet in the faces of the gathered few there was apparent a wisdom and a penetrating understanding and a leisurely efficiency in action that it would have been hard to find the equal of, in any similar group in earlier times. And a good thing, thought Clawly, for what he was trying to convince them of was something not calculated to appeal to the intelligence of practical administrators—it was doubtful if any earlier culture would have granted him and Thorn any hearing at all.

He surveyed the faces unobtrusively, his dark glance flitting like a shadow, and was relieved to note that only in Conjerly's and perhaps Tempelmar's was a completely unfavorable reaction apparent. Firemoor, on the contrary, registered feverish and unquestioning belief, but that was to be expected in the volatile, easily swayed chief of the Extraterrestrial Service—and a man who was Clawly's admiring friend. Firemoor was alone in this open expression of credulity. Chairman Shielding, whose opinion mattered most, looked on the whole skeptical and perhaps a shade disapproving; though that, fortunately, was the heavy-set man's normal expression.

The rest, reserving judgment, were watchful and attentive. With the unexpected exception of Thorn, who seemed scarcely to be listening, lost in some strange fatigued abstraction since he had finished making his report.

A still-wavering audience, Clawly decided. What he said now, and how he said it, would count heavily.

He touched a small box. Instantly some tens of thousands of pinpricks of green light twinkled from the World Map.

He said, "The nightmare-frequency for an average night a hundred years ago, as extrapolated from random samplings. Each dot—a bad dream. A dream bad enough to make the dreamer wake in fright."

Again he touched the box. The twinkling pattern changed slightly—there were different clusterings—but the total number of pinpricks seemed not to change.

"The same, for fifty years ago," he said. "Next—forty." Again there was merely a slight alteration in the grouping.

"And now—thirty." This time the total number of pinpricks seemed slightly to increase.

Clawly paused. He said, "I'd like to remind you, gentlemen, that Thorn proved conclusively that his method of sampling was not responsible for any changes in the frequency. He met all the objections you raised—that his subjects were reporting their dreams more fully, that he wasn't switching subjects often enough to avoid cultivating a nightmare-dreaming tendency, and so on."

Once more his hand moved toward the box. "Twenty-five." This time there was no arguing about the increase.

"Twenty."

"Fifteen."

"Ten."

"Five."

Each time the total greenness jumped, until now it was a general glow emanating from all the continental areas. Only the seas still showed widely scattered points, where men dreamed in supra- or sub-surface craft, and a few heavy clusters, where ocean-based skylons rose through the waves.

"And now, gentlemen, the present."

The evil radiance swamped the continents, reached out and touched the faces of the armchair observers.

"There you have it, gentlemen. A restful night in utopia," said Clawly quietly. The green glow unwholesomely emphasized his tired pallor and the creases of strain around eyes and mouth. He went on, "Of course it's obvious that if nightmares are as common as all that, you and yours can hardly have escaped. Each of you knows the answer to that question. As for myself—my nightly experiences provide one more small confirmation of Thorn's report."

He switched off the map. The carefully noncommittal faces turned back to him.

Clawly noted that the faint, creeping dawn-line on the World Map was hardly two hours away from the Opal Cross. He said, "I pass over

the corroborating evidence—the slight steady decrease in average sleeping time, the increase in day sleeping and nocturnal social activity, the unprecedented growth of art and fiction dealing with supernatural terror, and so on—in order to emphasize as strongly as possible Thorn's secondary discovery: the similarity between the nightmare landscapes of his dreamers. A similarity so astonishing that, to me, the wonder is that it wasn't noticed sooner, though of course Thorn wasn't looking for it and he tells me that most of his earlier subjects were unable, or disinclined, to describe in detail the landscapes of their nightmares." He looked around. "Frankly, that similarity is unbelievable. I don't think even Thorn did full justice to it in the time he had for his report—you'd have to visit his offices, see his charts and dream-sketches, inspect his monumental tables of correlation. Think: hundreds of dreamers, to take only Thorn's samples, thousands of miles apart, and all of them dreaming—not the *same* nightmare, which might be explained by assuming telepathy or some subtle form of mass suggestion—but nightmares with the same landscape, the same general landscape. As if each dreamer were looking through a different window at a consistently distorted version of our own world. A dream world so real that when I recently suggested to Thorn he try to make a map of it, he did *not* dismiss my notion as nonsensical."

The absence of a stir among his listeners was more impressive than any stir could have been. Clawly noted that Conjerly's frown had deepened, become almost angry. He seemed about to speak, when Tempelmar casually forestalled him.

"I don't think telepathy can be counted out as an explanation," said the tall, long-featured, sleepy-eyed man. "It's still a purely hypothetic field—we don't know how it would operate. And there may have been contacts between Thorn's subjects that he didn't know about. They may have told each other their nightmares and so started a train of suggestion."

"I don't believe so," said Clawly slowly. "His precautions were thorough. Moreover, it wouldn't fit with the reluctance of the dreamers to describe their nightmares."

"Also," Tempelmar continued, "we still aren't a step nearer the underlying cause of the phenomenon. It might be anything—for instance, some unpredictable physiological effect of subtronic power, since it came into use about thirty years ago."

"Precisely," said Clawly. "And so for the present we'll leave it at that—vastly more frequent nightmares with strangely similar landscapes, cause unknown—while I"—he again gaged the position of the dawn-line—"while I hurry on to those matters which I consider the core of our case: the incidence of cryptic amnesia and delusions of nonrecognition. The latter first."

Again Conjerly seemed about to interrupt, and again something stopped him. Clawly got the impression it was a slight deterring movement from Tempelmar.

He touched the box. Some hundreds of yellow dots appeared on the World Map, a considerable portion of them in close clusters of two and three.

He said, "This time, remember, we can't go back any fifty years. These are such recent matters that there wasn't any hint of them even in last year's Report on the Psychological State of the World. As the experts agreed, we are dealing with an entirely new kind of mental disturbance. At least, no cases can be established prior to the last two years, which is the period covered by this projection."

He looked toward the map. "Each yellow dot is a case of delusions of nonrecognition. An otherwise normal individual fails to recognize a family member or friend, maintains in the face of all evidence that he is an alien and impostor—a frequent accusation, quite baseless, is that his place has been taken by an unknown identical twin. This delusion persists, attended by emotional disturbances of such magnitude that the sufferer seeks the services of a psychiatrist—in those cases we *know* about. With the psychiatrist's assistance, one of two adjustments is achieved: the delusions fade and the avowed alien is accepted as the true individual, or they persist and there is a separation—where husband and wife are involved, a divorce. In either case, the sufferer recovers completely.

"And now—cryptic amnesia. For a reason that will soon become apparent, I'll first switch off the other projection."

The yellow dots vanished, and in their place glowed a somewhat smaller number of violet pinpoints. These showed no tendency to form clusters.

"It is called cryptic, I'll remind you, because the victim makes a very determined and intelligently executed effort to conceal his memory lapse—frequently shutting himself up for several days on some pre-

text and feverishly studying all materials and documents relating to himself he can lay hands on. Undoubtedly sometimes he succeeds. The cases we hear about are those in which he makes such major slips —as being mistaken as to what his business is, whom he is married to, who his friends are, what is going on in the world—that he is forced, against his will, to go to a psychiatrist. Whereupon, realizing that his efforts have failed, he generally confesses his amnesia, but is unable to offer any information as to its cause, or any convincing explanation of his attempt at concealment. Thereafter, readjustment is rapid."

He looked around. "And now, gentlemen, a matter which the experts didn't bring out, because I arranged it that way. I have saved it in order to impress it upon your minds as forcibly as possible—the correlation between cryptic amnesia and delusions of nonrecognition."

He paused with his hand near the box, aware that there was something of the conjurer about his movements and trying to minimize it. "I'm going to switch on both projections at once. Where cases of cryptic amnesia and delusions of nonrecognition coincide—I mean, where it is the cryptic amnesiac about whom the other person or persons had delusions of nonrecognition—the dots will likewise coincide; and you know what happens when violet and yellow light mix. I'll remind you that in ordinary cases of amnesia there are no delusions of nonrecognition—family and friends are aware of the victim's memory lapse, but they do not mistake him for a stranger."

His hand moved. Except for a sprinkling of yellow, the dots that glowed on the map were pure white.

"Complementary colors," said Clawly quietly. "The yellow has blanked out all the violet. In some cases one violet has accounted for a cluster of yellows—where more than one individual had delusions of nonrecognition about the same cryptic amnesiac. Except for the surplus cases of nonrecognition—which almost certainly correspond to cases of successfully concealed cryptic amnesia—the nonrecognitions and cryptic amnesias are shown to be dual manifestations of a single underlying phenomenon."

He paused. The tension in the Sky Room deepened. He leaned forward. "It is that underlying phenomenon, gentlemen, which I believe constitutes a threat to the security of the world, and demands the most immediate and thoroughgoing investigation. Though staggering, the implications are obvious."

The tautness continued, but slowly Conjerly got to his feet. His compact, stubby frame, bald bullethead, and uncompromisingly impassive features were in striking contrast with Clawly's mobile, half-haggard, debonair visage.

Leashed anger deepened Conjerly's voice, enhanced its authority.

"We have come a long way from the Dawn Era, gentlemen. One might think we would never again have to grapple with civilization's old enemy superstition. But I am forced to that regretful conclusion when I hear this gentleman, to whom we have granted the privilege of an audience, advancing theories of demoniac possession to explain cases of amnesia and nonrecognition." He looked at Clawly. "Unless I wholly misunderstood?"

Clawly decisively shook his head. "You didn't. It is my contention—I might as well put it in plain words—that alien minds are displacing the minds of our citizens, that they are infiltering Earth, seeking to gain a foothold here. As to what minds they are, where they come from—I can't answer that, except to remind you that Thorn's studies of dream landscapes hint at a world strangely like our own, though strangely distorted. But the secrecy of the invaders implies that their purpose is hostile—at best, suspect. And I need not remind you that, in this age of subtronic power, the presence of even a tiny hostile group could become a threat to Earth's very existence."

Slowly Conjerly clenched his stub fingers, unclenched them. When he spoke, it was as if he were reciting a creed.

"Materialism is our bedrock, gentlemen—the firm belief that every phenomenon must have a real existence and a real cause. It has made possible science technology, unbiased self-understanding. I am open-minded. I will go as far as any in granting a hearing to new theories. But when those theories are a revival of the oldest and most ignorant superstitions, when this gentleman seeks to frighten us with nightmares and tales of evil spirits stealing human bodies, when he asks us on this evidence to institute a gigantic witch-hunt, when he raises the old bogey of subtronic power breaking loose, when he brings in a colleague"—he glared at Thorn—"who takes seriously to the idea of surveying dream worlds with transit and theodolite—then I say, gentlemen, that if we yield to such suggestions, we might as well throw materialism overboard and, as for safeguarding the future of mankind, ask the advice of fortunetellers!"

At the last word Clawly started, recovered himself. He dared not look around to see if anyone had noticed.

The anger in Conjerly's voice strained at its leash, threatened to break it.

"I presume, sir, that your confidential investigators will go out with wolfsbane to test for werewolves, garlic to uncover vampires, and cross and holy water to exorcise demons!"

"They will go out with nothing but open minds," Clawly answered quietly.

Conjerly breathed deeply, his face reddened slightly, he squared himself for a fresh and more uncompromising assault. But just at that moment Tempelmar eased himself out of his chair. As if by accident, his elbow brushed Conjerly's.

"No need to quarrel," Tempelmar drawled pleasantly, "though our visitor's suggestions do sound rather peculiar to minds tempered to a realistic materialism. Nevertheless, it is our duty to safeguard the world from any real dangers, no matter how improbable or remote. So, considering the evidence, we must not pass lightly over our visitor's theory that alien minds are usurping those of Earth—at least not until there has been an opportunity to advance alternate theories."

"Alternate theories *have* been advanced, tested, and discarded," said Clawly sharply.

"Of course," Tempelmar agreed smilingly. "But in science that's a process that never quite ends, isn't it?"

He sat down, Conjerly following suit as if drawn. Clawly was irascibly conscious of having got the worst of the interchange—and the lanky, sleepy-eyed Tempelmar's quiet skepticism had been more damaging than Conjerly's blunt opposition, though both had told. He felt, emanating from the two of them, a weight of personal hostility that bothered and oppressed him. For a moment they seemed like utter strangers.

He was conscious of standing too much alone. In every face he could suddenly see skepticism. Shielding was the worst—his expression had become that of a man who suddenly sees through the tricks of a sleight-of-hand artist masquerading as a true magician. And Thorn, who should have been mentally at his side, lending him support, was sunk in some strange reverie.

He realized that even in his own mind there was a growing doubt of the things he was saying.

Then, utterly unexpectedly, adding immeasurably to his dismay, Thorn got up, and without even a muttered excuse to the men beside him, left the room. He moved a little stiffly, like a sleepwalker. Several glanced after him curiously. Conjerly nodded. Tempelmar smiled.

Clawly noted it. He rallied himself. He said, "Well, gentlemen?"

III

But who will reveal to our waking ken
The forms that swim and the shapes that creep
Under the waters of sleep?
The Marshes of Glynn, Sidney Lanier.

Like a dreamer who falls headforemost for giddy miles and then is wafted to a stop as gently as a leaf, Thorn plunged down the main vertical levitator of the Opal Cross and swam out of it at ground level, before its descent into the half mile of basements. At this hour the great gravity-less tube was relatively empty, except for the ceaseless silent plunge and ascent of the graduated subtronic currents and the air they swept along. There were a few other down-and-up swimmers —distant leaflike swirls of color afloat in the contracting white perspective of the tube—but, like a dreamer, Thorn did not seem to take note of them.

Another levitating current carried him along some hundred yards of mural-faced corridor to one of the pedestrian entrances of the Opal Cross. A group of revelers stopped their crazy, squealing dance in the current to watch him. They looked like figures swum out of the potently realistic murals—but with a more hectic, troubled gaiety on their faces. There was something about the way he plunged past them unseeing, his sleepwalker's eyes fixed on something a dozen yards ahead, that awakened unpleasant personal thoughts and spoiled their feverish fun-making.

The pedestrian entrance was really a city-limits. Here the one-building metropolis ended, and there began the horizontal miles of half-wild countryside, dark as the ancient past, trackless and roadless in the main, dotted in many areas with small private dwellings, but liberally brushed with forests.

A pair of lovers on the terrace, pausing for a kiss as they adjusted their flying togs, broke off to look curiously after Thorn as he hurried down the ramp and across the close-cropped lawn, following one of the palely glowing pathways. The up-slanting pathlight, throwing into gaunt relief his angular cheekbones and chin, made him resemble some ancient pilgrim or crusader in the grip of a religious compulsion.

Then the forest had swallowed him up.

A strange mixture of trance and willfulness, of dream and waking, of aimless wandering and purposeful tramping, gripped Thorn as he adventured down that black-fringed ghost-trail. Odd memories of childhood, of old hopes and desires, of student days with Clawly, of his work and the bewildering speculations it had led to, drifted across his mind, poignant but meaningless. Among these, but drained of significance, like the background of a dream, there was a lingering picture of the scene he had left behind him in the Sky Room. He was conscious of somehow having deserted a friend, abandoned a world, betrayed a great purpose—but it was a blurred consciousness and he had forgotten what the great purpose was.

Nothing seemed to matter any longer but the impulse pulling him forward, the sense of an unknown but definite destination.

He had the feeling that if he looked long enough at that receding, beckoning point a dozen yards ahead, something would grow there.

The forest path was narrow and twisting. Its faint glow silhouetted weeds and brambles partly overgrowing it. His hands pushed aside encroaching twigs.

He felt something tugging at his mind from ahead, as if there were other avenues leading to his subconscious than that which went through his consciousness. As if his subconscious were the core of two or more minds, of which his was the only one.

Under the influence of that tugging, imagination awoke.

Instantly it began to re-create the world of his nightmares. The world which had obscurely dominated his life and turned him to dream-research, where he had found similar nightmares. The world where danger lay. The blue-litten world in which a mushroom growth of ugly squat buildings, like the factories and tenements and barracks of ancient times, blotched the utopian countryside, and along whose sluicelike avenues great crowds of people ceaselessly drifted, unhappy but unable to rest—among them that other, dream Thorn, who hated

and envied him, deluged him with an almost unbearable sense of guilt.

For almost as long as he could remember, that dream Thorn had tainted his life—the specter at his feasts, the suppliant at his gates, the eternal accuser in the courts of inmost thought—drifting phantomwise across his days, rising up starkly real and terrible in his nights. During the long, busy holiday of youth, when every day had been a new adventure and every thought a revelation, that dream Thorn had been painfully discovering the meaning of oppression and fear, had been security swept away and parents exiled, had attended schools in which knowledge was forbidden and all a man learned was his place. When he was discovering happiness and love, that dream Thorn had been rebelliously grieving for a young wife snatched away from him forever because of some autocratic government's arbitrary decrees. And while he was accomplishing his life's work, building new knowledge stone by stone, that dream Thorn had toiled monotonously at meaningless jobs, slunk away to brood and plot with others of his kind, been harried by a fiendishly efficient secret police, become a hater and a killer.

Day by day, month by month, year by year, the dark-stranded dream life had paralleled his own.

He knew the other Thorn's emotions almost better than his own, but the actual conditions and specific details of the dream Thorn's life were blurred and confused in a characteristically dreamlike fashion. It was as if he were dreaming that other Thorn's dreams—while, by some devilish exchange, that other Thorn dreamed his dreams and hated him for his good fortune.

A sense of guilt toward his dream-twin was the dominant fact in Thorn's inner life.

And now, pushing through the forest, he began to fancy that he could see something at the receding focus of his vision a dozen yards ahead, something that kept flickering and fading, so that he could scarcely be sure that he saw it, and that yet seemed an embodiment of all the unseen forces dragging him along—a pale, wraithlike face, horribly like his own.

The sense of a destination grew stronger and more urgent. The mile wall of the Opal Cross, a pale cataract of stone glimpsed now and then through overhanging branches, still seemed to rise almost at his heels,

creating the maddening illusion that he was making no progress. The wraith-face blacked out. He began to run.

Twigs lashed him. A root caught at his foot. He stumbled, checked himself, and went on more slowly, relieved to find that he could at least govern the rate of his progress.

The forces tugging at him were both like and infinitely unlike those which had for a moment controlled his movements at the symchromy. Whereas those had seemed to have a wholly alien source, these seemed to have come from a single human mind.

He felt in his pocket for the object he had stolen from Clawly's mysterious confidant. He could not see much of its color now, but that made its baffling texture stand out. It seemed to have a little more inertia than its weight would account for. He was certain he had never touched anything quite like it before.

He couldn't say where the notion came from, but he suddenly found himself wondering if the thing could be a single molecule. Fantastic! And yet, was there anything to absolutely prevent atoms from assembling, or being assembled, in such a giant structure?

Such a molecule would have more atoms than the universe had suns.

Oversize molecules were the keys of life—the hormones, the activators, the carriers of heredity. What doors might not a supergiant molecule unlock?

The merest fancy—yet frightening. He started to throw the thing away, but instead tucked it back in his pocket.

There was a rush in the leaves. A large cat paused for an instant in the pathlight to snarl and stare at him. Such cats were common pets, for centuries bred for intelligence and for centuries tame. Yet now, on the prowl, it seemed all wild—with an added, evil insight gained from long association with man.

The path branched. He took a sharp turn, picking his way over bulbous roots. The pathlight grew dim and diffuse, its substance dissolved and spread by erosion. At places the vegetation had absorbed some of the luminescence. Leaves and stems glowed faintly.

But beyond, on either side, the forest was a black, choked infinity. It had come inscrutably alive.

The sense of a thousand infinities pressing upon him, experienced briefly at the Yggdrasil, now returned with redoubled force.

The Yggdrasil was true. Reality was not what it seemed on the surface. It had many roots, some strong and true, some twisted and gnarled, nourished in many worlds.

He quickened his pace. Again something seemed to be growing at the focus of his vision—a flitting, pulsating, bluish glow. It was like the Yggdrasil's Nidhogg motif. Nidhogg, the worm gnawing ceaselessly at the root of the tree of life that goes down to hell. It droned against his vision—an unshakable color-tune.

Then, gradually, it became a face. His own face, but seared by unfamiliar emotions, haggard with unknown miseries, hard, vengeful, accusing—the face of the dream Thorn, beckoning, commanding, luring him toward some unknown destination in the maze of unknown, unseen worlds.

With a sob of courage and fear, he plunged toward it.

He must come to grips with that other Thorn, settle accounts with him, even the balance of pleasure and pain between them, right the wrong of their unequal lives. For in some sense he must *be* that other Thorn, and that other Thorn must be he. And a man could not be untrue to himself.

The wraithlike face receded as swiftly as he advanced.

His progress through the forest became a nightmarish running of the gauntlet, through a double row of giant black trees that slashed him with their branches.

The face kept always a few yards ahead.

Fear came, but too late—he could not stop.

The dreamy veils that had been drawn across his thoughts and memories during the first stages of his flight from the Opal Cross, were torn away. He realized that what was happening to him was the same thing that had happened to hundreds of other individuals. He realized that an alien mind was displacing his own, that another invader and potential cryptic amnesiac was gaining a foothold on Earth.

The thought hit him hard that he was deserting Clawly, leaving the whole world in the lurch.

But he was only a will-less thing that ran with outclutched hands.

Once he crossed a bare hilltop and for a moment caught a glimpse of the lonely glowing skylons—the Blue Lorraine, the Gray Twins, the Myrtle Y—but distant beyond reach, like a farewell.

He was near the end of his strength.

The sense of a destination grew overpoweringly strong.

Now it was something just around the next turn in the path.

He plunged through a giddy stretch of darkness thick as ink—and came to a desperate halt, digging in his heels, flailing his arms.

From somewhere, perhaps from deep within his own mind, came a faint echo of mocking laughter.

IV

If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not—
Macbeth.

Like a note in the grip of an intangible whirlwind, Clawly whipped through the gray dawn on a steady surge of subtronic power toward the upper levels of the Blue Lorraine. The brighter stars, and Mars, were winking out. Through the visor of his flying togs the rushing air sent a chill to which his blood could not quite respond. He should be home, recuperating from defeat, planning new lines of attack. He should be letting fatigue poisons drain normally from his plasma, instead of knocking them out with stimulol. He should be giving his thoughts a chance to unwind. Or he should have given way to lurking apprehensions and be making a frantic search for Thorn. But the itch of a larger worry was upon him, and until he had done a certain thing, he could not pursue personal interests, or rest.

With Thorn gone, his rebuff in the Sky Room loomed as a black and paralyzingly insurmountable obstacle that grew momently higher. They were lucky, he told himself, not to have had their present research funds curtailed—let alone having them increased, or being given a large staff of assistants, or being granted access to the closely guarded files of confidential information on cryptic amnesiacs and other citizens. Any earlier culture would probably have forbidden their research entirely, as a menace to the mental stability of the public. Only an almost fetishlike reverence for individual liberty and the inviolability of personal pursuits had saved him.

The Committee's adverse decision had even shaken his own beliefs. He felt himself a puny little man, beset by uncertainties and doubts, quite incompetent to protect the world from dangers as shadowy, vast, and inscrutable as the gloom-drenched woodlands a mile below.

Why the devil had Thorn left the meeting like that, of necessity creating a bad impression? Surely he couldn't have given way to any luring hypnotic impulse—he of all men ought to know the danger of that. Still, there had been that unpleasant suggestion of sleepwalking in his departure—an impression that Clawly's memory kept magnifying. And Thorn was a strange fellow. After all these years, Clawly still found him unpredictable. Thorn had a spiritual recklessness, an urge to plumb all mental deeps. And God knows there were deeps enough for plumbing these days, if one were foolish. Clawly felt them in himself—the faint touch of a darker, less pleasant version of his own personality, against which he must keep constantly on guard.

If he had let something happen to Thorn—!

A variation in the terrestrial magnetic field, not responded to soon enough, sent him spinning sideways a dozen yards, forced his attention back on his trip.

He wondered if he had managed to slip away as unobtrusively as he had thought. A few of the committee members had wanted to talk. Firemoor, who had voted against the others and supported Clawly's views rather too excitedly, had been particularly insistent. But he had managed to put them off. Still, what if he were followed? Surely Conjerly's reference to "fortunetellers" had been mere chance, although it had given him a nasty turn. But if Conjerly and Tempelmar should find out where he was going now— What a handle that would give them against him!

It would be wiser to drop the whole business, at least for a time.

No use. The vice of the thing—if vice it be—was in his blood. The Blue Lorraine drew him as a magnet flicks up a grain of iron.

A host of images fought for possession of his tired mind, as he plunged through thin streamers of paling cloud. Green dots on the World Map. The greens and blues of the Yggdrasil—and in what nightmare worlds had Hoderson found his inspiration? The blue-tinted sketches one of Thorn's dreamers had made of the world of his nightmares. A sallow image of Thorn's face altered and drawn by pain, such an image as might float into the mind of one who watches too long by a sickbed. The looks on the faces of Conjerly and Tempelmar—that fleeting impression of a hostile strangeness. The hint of a dark alien presence in the depths of his own mind.

The Blue Lorraine grew gigantic, loomed as a vast, shadow-girt

cliff, its topmost pinnacles white with frost although the night below had been summery. There were already signs of a new day beginning. Here and there freighters clung like beetles to the wall, discharging or receiving cargo through unseen ports. Some distance below a stream of foodstuffs for the great dining halls, partly packaged, partly not, was coming in on a subtronic current. Off to one side an attendant shepherded a small swarm of arriving schoolchildren, although it was too early yet for the big crowds.

Clawly swooped to a landing stage, hovered for a moment like a bird, then dropped. In the anteroom he and another early arriver helped each other remove and check their flying togs.

He was breathing hard, there was a deafness and a ringing in his ears, he rubbed his chilled fingers. He should not have made such a steep and swift ascent. It would have been easier to land at a lower stage and come up by levitator. But this way was more satisfying to his impatience. And there was less chance of someone following him unseen.

A levitating current wafted him down a quarter mile of mainstem corridor to the district of the psychologists. From there he walked.

He looked around uneasily. Only now did real doubt hit him. What if Conjerly were right? What if he were merely dragging up ancient superstitions, foisting them on a group of overspecialized experts, Thorn included? What if the world-threat he had tried to sell to the World Executive Committee were just so much morbid nonsense, elaborately bastioned by a vast array of misinterpreted evidence? What if the darker, crueler, deviltry-loving side of his mind were more in control than he realized? He felt uncomfortably like a charlatan, a mountebank trying to pipe the whole world down a sinister side street, a chaos-loving jester seeking to perpetrate a vast and unpleasant hoax. It was all such a crazy business, with origins far more dubious than he had dared reveal even to Thorn, from whom he had no other secrets. Best back down now, at least quit stirring up any more dark currents.

But the other urge was irresistible. There were things he had to know, no matter the way of knowing.

Stealing himself, he paraphrased Conjerly. "If the evidence seems to point that way, if the safety of mankind seems to demand it, then I *will* throw materialism overboard and ask the advice of fortunetellers!"

He stopped. A door faced him. Abruptly it was a doorway. He went

in, approached the desk and the motionless, black-robed figure behind it.

As always, there was in Oktav's face that overpowering suggestion of age—age far greater than could be accounted for by filmy white hair, sunken cheeks, skin tight-drawn and wrinkle-etched. Unwilled, Clawly's thoughts turned toward the Dawn Civilization with its knights in armor and aircraft winged like birds, its whispered tales of elixirs of eternal life—and toward that oddly long-lived superstition, rumor, hallucination, that men clad in the antique garments of the Late Middle Dawn Civilization occasionally appeared on Earth for brief periods at remote places.

Oktav's garb, at any rate, was just an ordinary houserobe. But in their wrinkle-meshed orbits, his eyes seemed to burn with the hopes and fears and sorrows of centuries. They took no note of Clawly as he edged into a chair.

"I see suspense and controversy," intoned the seer abruptly. "All night it has surged around you. It regards that matter whereof we spoke at the Yggdrasil. I see others doubting and you seeking to persuade them. I see two in particular in grim opposition to you, but I cannot see their minds or motives. I see you in the end losing your grip, partly because of a friend's seeming desertion, and going down in defeat."

Of course, thought Clawly, he could learn all this by fairly simple spying. Still, it impressed him, as it always had since he first chanced—But was it wholly chance?—to contact Oktav in the guise of an ordinary psychologist.

Not looking at the seer, with a shyness he showed toward no one else, Clawly asked, "What about the world's future? Do you see anything more there?"

There was a faint drumming in the seer's voice. "Only thickening dreams, more alien spirits stalking the world in human mask, doom overhanging, great claws readying to pounce—but whence or when I cannot tell, only that your recent effort to convince others of the danger has brought the danger closer."

Clawly shivered. Then he sat straighter. He was no longer shy. Docketing the question about Thorn that was pushing at his lips, he said, "Look, Oktav, I've got to know more. It's obvious that you're hiding things from me. If I map the best course I can from the hints you

give me, and then you tell me that it is the wrong course, you tie my hands. For the good of mankind, you've got to describe the overhanging danger more definitely."

"And bring down upon us forces that will destroy us both?" The seer's eyes stabbed at him. "There are worlds within worlds, wheels within wheels. Already I have told you too much for our safety. Moreover, there are things I honestly do not know, things hidden even from the Great Experimenters—and my guesses might be worse than yours."

Taut with a sense of feverish unreality, Clawly's mind wandered. What was Oktav—what lay behind that ancient mask? Were all faces only masks? What lay behind Conjerly's and Tempelmar's? Thorn's? His own? Could your own mind be a mask, too, hiding things from your own consciousness? What was the world—this brief masquerade of inexplicable events, flaring up from the future to be instantly extinguished in the past?

"But then what am I to do, Oktav?" he heard his tired voice ask.

The seer replied, "I have told you before. Prepare your world for any eventuality. Arm it. Mobilize it. Do not let it wait supine for the hunter."

"But how can I, Oktav? My request for a mere program of investigation was balked. How can I ask the world to arm—for no reason?"

The seer paused. When he finally answered there drummed in his voice, stronger than ever, the bitter wisdom of centuries.

"Then you must give it a reason. Always governments have provided appropriate motives for action, when the real motives would be unpalatable to the many, or beyond their belief. You must extemporize a danger that fits the trend of their short-range thinking. Now let me see— Mars—"

There was a slight sound. The seer wheeled around with a serpentine rapidity, one skinny hand plunged in the breast of his robe. It fumbled wildly, agitating the black, weightless fabric, then came out empty. A look of extreme consternation contorted his features.

Clawly's eyes shifted with his to the inner doorway.

The figure stayed there peering at Oktav for only a moment. Then, with an impatient, peremptory flirt of its head, it turned and moved out of sight. But it was indelibly etched, down to the very last detail, on Clawly's panic-shaken vision.

Most immediately frightening was the impression of age—age

greater than Oktav's, although, or perhaps because, the man's physical appearance was that of thirty-odd, with dark hair, low forehead, vigorous jaw. But in the eyes, in the general expression—centuries of knowledge. Yet knowledge without wisdom, or with only a narrow-minded, puritanic, unsympathetic, overweening simulacrum of wisdom. A disturbing blend of unconscious ignorance and consciousness of power. The animal man turned god, without transfiguration.

But the most lingering impression, oddly repellent, was of its clothing. Crampingly unwieldy upper and nether garments of tight-woven, compressed, tortured animal-hair, fastened by bits of bone or horn. The upper garment had an underduplicate of some sort of bleached vegetable fiber, confined at the throat by two devices—one a tightly knotted scarf of crudely woven and colored insect spinnings, the other a high and unyielding white neckband, either of the same fiber as the shirt, glazed and stiffened, or some primitive plastic.

It gave Clawly an added, anticlimactic start to realize that the clothing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which he had seen pictured in history albums, would have just this appearance, if actually prepared according to the ancient processes and worn by a human being.

Without explanation, Oktav rose and moved toward the inner doorway. His hand fumbled again in his robe, but it was merely an idle repetition of the earlier gesture. In the last glimpse he had of his face, Clawly saw continued consternation, frantic memory-searching, and the frozen intentness of a competent mind scanning every possible avenue of escape from a deadly trap.

Oktav went through the doorway.

There was no sound.

Clawly waited.

Time spun on. Clawly shifted his position, caught himself, coughed, waited, coughed again, got up, moved toward the inner doorway, came back and sat down.

There was time, too much time. Time to think again and again of that odd superstition about fleeting appearances of men in Dawn-Civilization garb. Time to make a thousand nightmarish deductions from the age in Oktav's, and that other's, eyes.

Finally he got up and walked to the inner doorway.

There was a tiny unfurnished room, without windows or another

door, the typical secondary compartment of offices like this. Its walls were bare and seamless.

There was no one.

▼

. . . and still remoter spaces where only a stirring in vague blacknesses had told of the presence of consciousness and will.

The Hunter of the Dark, Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

With a sickening ultimate plunge, that seemed to plumb in instants distances greater than the diameter of the cosmos—a plunge in which more than flesh and bones were stripped away, transformed—Oktav followed his summoner into a region of not only visual night.

Here in the Zone, outside the bubble of space-time, on the borders of eternity, even the atoms were still. Only thought moved—but thought powered beyond description or belief, thought that could make or mar universes, thought not unbefitting gods.

Most strange, then, to realize that it was human thought, with all its homely biases and foibles. Like finding, on another planet in another universe, a peasant's cottage with smoke wreathing above the thatched roof and an axe wedged in a half-chopped log.

Mice scurrying at midnight in a vast cathedral—and the faint suggestion that the cathedral might not be otherwise wholly empty.

Oktav, or that which had been Oktav, oriented itself—himself—making use of the sole means of perception that functioned in the Zone. It was most akin to touch, but touch strangely extended and sensitive only to projected thought or processes akin to thought.

Groping like a man shut in an infinite closet, Oktav felt the eternal hum of the Probability Engine, the lesser hum of the seven unlocked talismans. He felt the seven human minds in their stations around the engine, felt six of them stiffen with cold disapproval as Ters made report. Then he took his own station, the last and eighth.

Ters concluded.

Prim thought, "We summoned you, Oktav, to hear your explanation of certain highly questionable activities in which you have recently indulged—only to learn that you have additionally committed an act of unprecedented negligence. Never before has a talisman been lost. And only twice has it been necessary to make an expedition to recover one—

when its possessor met accidental death in a space-time world. How can you have permitted this to happen, since a talisman gives infallible warning if it is in any way spacially or temporarily parted from its owner?"

"I am myself deeply puzzled," Oktav admitted. "Some obscure influence must have been operative, inhibiting the warning or closing my mind to it. I did not become aware of the loss until I was summoned. However, casting my mind back across the last Earth-day's events, I believe I can now discern the identity of the individual into whose hands it fell—or who stole it."

"Was the talisman inert at the time?" thought Prim quickly.

"Yes," thought Oktav. "A Key-idea known only to myself would be necessary to unlock its powers."

"That is one small point in your favor," thought Prim.

"I am gravely at fault," thought Oktav, "but it can easily be mended. Lend me another talisman and I will return to the world and recover it."

"It will not be permitted," thought Prim. "You have already spent too much time in the world, Oktav. Although you are the youngest of us, your body is senile."

Before he could check himself, or at least avoid projection, Oktav thought, "Yes, and by so doing I have learned much that you, in your snug retreat, would do well to become aware of."

"The world and its emotions have corrupted you," thought Prim. "And that brings me to the second and major point of our complaint."

Oktav felt the seven minds converge hostilely upon him. Careful to mask his ideational processes, Oktav probed the others for possible sympathy or weakness. Lack of a talisman put him at a great disadvantage. His hopes fell.

Prim thought, "It has come to our attention that you have been telling secrets. Moved by some corrupt emotionality, and under the astounding primitive guise of fortunetelling, you have been disbursing forbidden knowledge—cloudily perhaps, but none the less unequivocally—to earthlings of the main-trunk world."

"I do not deny it," thought Oktav, crossing his Rubicon. "The main-trunk world *needs* to know more. It has been your spoiled brat. And as often happens to a spoiled brat, you now push it, unprepared and unaided, into a dubious future."

Prim's answering thought, amplified by his talisman, thundered in the measureless dark. "*We* are the best judges of what is good for the world. Our minds are dedicated far more selflessly than yours to the world's welfare, and we have chosen the only sound scientific method for insuring its continued and ultimate happiness. One of the unalterable conditions of that method is that no Earthling have the slightest concrete hint of our activities. Has your mind departed so far from scientific clarity—influenced perhaps by bodily decay due to injudicious exposure to space-time—that I must recount to your our purpose and our rules?"

The darkness pulsed. Oktav projected no answering thought. Prim continued, thinking in a careful step-by-step way, as if for a child.

"No scientific experiment is possible without controls—set-ups in which the conditions are unaltered, as a comparison, in order to gauge the exact effects of the alteration. There is, under natural conditions, only one world. Hence no experiments can be performed upon it. One can never test scientifically which form of social organization, government, and so forth, is best for it. But the creation of alternate worlds by the Probability Engine changes all that."

Prim's thought beat at Oktav.

"Can it be that the underlying logic of our procedure has somehow always escaped you? From our vantage point we observe the world as it rides into the cone of the future—a cone that always narrows toward the present, because in the remote future there are many major possibilities still realizable, in the near future only a relative few. We note the approach of crucial epochs, when the world must make some great choice, as between democracy and totalitarianism, managerialism and servicism, benevolent elitism and enforced equalism and so on. Then, carefully choosing the right moment and focusing the Probability Engine chiefly upon the minds of the world's leaders, we widen the cone of the future. Two or more major possibilities are then realized instead of just one. Time is bifurcated, or trifurcated. We have alternate worlds, at first containing many objects and people in common, but diverging more and more—bifurcating more and more completely —as the consequences of the alternate decisions make themselves felt."

"I criticize," thought Oktav, plunging into uncharted waters. "You are thinking in generalities. You are personifying the world, and forgetting that major possibilities are merely an accumulation of minor

ones. I do not believe that the distinction between the two major alternate possibilities in a bifurcation is at all clear-cut."

The idea was too novel to make any immediate impression, except that Oktav's mind was indeed being hazy and disordered. As if Oktav had not thought, Prim continued, "For example, we last split the time-stream thirty Earth-years ago. Discovery of subtronic power had provided the world with a practically unlimited source of space-time energy. The benevolent elite governing the world was faced with three clear-cut alternatives: It could suppress the discovery completely, killing its inventors. It could keep it a Party secret, make it a Party asset. It could impart it to the world at large, which would destroy the authority of the Party and be tantamount to dissolving it, since it would put into the hands of any person, or a least any small group of persons, the power to destroy the world. In a natural state, only one of these possibilities could be realized. Earth would only have one chance in three of guessing right. As we arranged it, all three possibilities were realized. A few years' continued observation sufficed to show us that the third alternative—that of making subtronic power common property—was the right one. The other two had already resulted in untold unendurable miseries and horrors."

"Yes, the botched worlds," Oktav interrupted bitterly. "How many of them have there been, Prim? How many, since the beginning?"

"In creating the best of all possible worlds, we of necessity also created the worst," Prim replied with a strained patience.

"Yes—worlds of horror that might have never been, had you not insisted on materializing all the possibilities, good and evil lurking in men's minds. If you had not interfered, man still might have achieved that best world—suppressing the evil possibilities."

"Do you suggest that we should leave all to chance?" Prim exploded angrily. "Become fatalists? We, who are masters of fate?"

"And then," Oktav continued, brushing aside the interruption, "having created those worst or near-worlds—but still human, living ones, with happiness as well as horror in them, populated by individuals honestly striving to make the best of bad guesses—you destroy them."

"Of course!" Prim thought back in righteous indignation. "As soon as we were sure they were the less desirable alternatives, we put them out of their misery."

"Yes." Oktav's bitterness was like an acid drench. "Drowning the

unwanted kittens. While you lavish affection on one, putting the rest in the sack."

"It was the most merciful thing to do," Prim retorted. "There was no pain—only instantaneous obliteration."

Oktav reacted. All his earlier doubts and flashes of rebellion were suddenly consolidated into a burning desire to shake the complacency of the others. He gave his ironic thoughts their head, sent them whipping through the dark.

"Who are you to tell whether or not there's pain in instantaneous obliteration? Oh yes, the botched worlds, the controls, the experiments that failed—they don't matter, let's put them out of their misery, let's get rid of the evidence of our mistakes, let's obliterate them because we can't stand their mute accusations. As if the Earthlings of the botched worlds didn't have as much right to their future, no matter how sorry and troubled, as the Earthlings of the main trunk. What crime have they committed save that of guessing wrong, when, by your admission, all was guesswork? What difference is there between the main trunk and the lopped branches, except your judgment that the former seems happier, more successful? Let me tell you something. You've coddled the main-trunk world for so long, you've tied your limited human affections to it so tightly, that you've gotten to believing that it's the only real world, the only world that counts—that the others are merely ghosts, object lessons, hypothetics. But in actuality they're just as throbbingly alive, just as deserving of consideration, just as real."

"They no longer exist," thought Prim crushingly. "It is obvious that your mind, tainted by Earth-bound emotions, has become hopelessly disordered. You are pleading the cause of that which no longer is."

"Are you so sure?" Oktav could feel his questioning thought hang in the dark, like a great black bubble, coercing attention. "What if the botched worlds still live? What if, in thinking to obliterate them, you have merely put them beyond the reach of your observation, cut them loose from the main-trunk time-stream, set them adrift in the oceans of eternity? I've told you that you ought to visit the world more often in the flesh. You'd find out that your beloved main-trunkers are becoming conscious of a shadowy, overhanging danger, that they're uncovering evidences of an infiltration, a silent and mystery-shrouded invasion across mental boundaries. Here and there in your main-trunk world,

minds are being displaced by minds from somewhere else. What if that invasion comes from one of the botched worlds—say from one of the worlds of the last trifurcation? That split occurred so recently that the alternate worlds would still contain many duplicate individuals, and between duplicate individuals there may be subtle bonds that reach even across the intertime void—on your admission, time-splits are never at first complete, and there may be unchanging *shared* deeps in the subconscious minds of duplicate individuals, opening the way for forced interchanges of consciousness. What if the botched worlds have continued to develop in the everlasting dark, outside the range of your knowledge, spawning who knows what abnormalities and horrors, like mutant monsters confined in caves? What if, with a tortured genius resulting from their misery, they've discovered things about time that even you do not know? What if they're out there—waiting, watching, devoured by resentment, preparing to leap upon your pet?"

Oktav paused and probed the darkness. Faint, but unmistakable, came the pulse of fear. He had shaken their complacency all right—but not to his advantage.

"You're thinking nonsense," Prim thundered at him coldly, in thought-tones in which there was no longer any hope of mercy or reprieve. "It is laughable even to consider that we could be guilty of such a glaring error as you suggest. We know every crevice of space-time, every twig and leaflet. We are the masters of the Probability Engine."

"Are you?" Reckless now of all consequences, Oktav asked the unprecedented, forbidden, ultimate question. "I know when I was initiated, and presumably when the rest of you were initiated, it was always assumed and strongly suggested, though never stated with absolute definiteness, that Prim, the first of us, a mental mutant and supergenius of the nineteenth century, invented the Probability Engine. I, an awestruck neophyte, accepted this attitude. But now I know that I never really believed it. No human mind could ever have conceived the Probability Engine. Prim did not invent it. He merely found it, probably by chancing on a lost talisman. Thereafter some peculiarity of the Engine permitted him to take it out of reach of its true owners, hide it from them. Then he took us in with him, one by one, because a single mind was insufficient to operate the Engine in all its phases and potentialities. But Prim never invented it. He stole it."

With a sense of exultation, Oktav realized that he had touched their

primal vulnerability—though at the same time insuring his own doom. He felt the seven resentful, frightened minds converge upon him suffocatingly. He probed now for one thing only—any relaxing of watchfulness, any faltering of awareness, on the part of any one of them. And as he probed, he kept choking out additional insults against the resistance.

"Is there any one of you, Prim included, who even understands the Probability Engine, let alone having the capacity to devise it?

"You prate of science, but do you understand even the science of modern Earthlings? Can any one of you outline to me the theoretic background of subtronic physics? Even your puppets have outstripped you. You're atavisms, relics of the Dawn Civilization, mental mummies, apes crept into a fatory at night and monkeying with the machinery.

"You're sorcerer's apprentices—and what will happen when the sorcerer comes back? What if I should stop this eternal whispering and send a call winging clear and unhampered through eternity: 'Oh sorcerer, True Owners, here is your stolen Engine'?"

They pressed on him frantically, frightenedly, as if by sheer mental weight to prevent any such call being sent. He felt that he would go down under the pressure, cease to be. But at the same time his probing uncovered a certain muddiness in Kart's thinking, a certain wandering due to doubt and fear, and he clutched at it, desperately but subtly.

Prim finished reading sentence. "—and so Ters and Septem will escort Oktav back to the world, and when he is in the flesh, make disposition of him." He paused, continued, "Meanwhile, Sikst will make an expedition to recover the lost talisman, calling for aid if not immediately successful. At the same time, since the functioning of the Probability Engine is seriously hampered so long as there is an empty station, Sekond, Kart and Kant will visit the world in order to select a suitable successor for Oktav. I will remain here and—"

He was interrupted by a flurry of startled thought from Kart, which rose swiftly to a peak of dismay.

"My talisman! Oktav has stolen it! He is gone!"

VI.

By her battened hatch I leaned and caught
Sounds from the noisome hold—
Cursing and sighing of souls distraught
And cries too sad to be told.
Gloucester Moors, William
Vaughn Moody.

Thorn teetered on the dark edge. His footgear made sudden grating noises against it as he fought for balance. He was vaguely conscious of shouts and of a needle of green light swinging down at him.

Unavailingly he wrenched the muscles of his calves, flailed the air with his arms.

Yet as he lurched over, as the edge receded upward—so slowly at first!—he became glad that he had fallen, for the down-chopping green needle made a red-hot splash of the place where he had been standing.

He plummeted, frantically squeezing the controls of flying togs he was not wearing.

There was time for a futile, spasmodic effort to get clear in his mind how, plunging through the forest, he should find himself on that dark edge.

Indistinct funnel-mouths shot past, so close he almost brushed them. Then he was into something tangly that impeded his fall—slowly at first, then swiftly, as pressures ahead were built up. His motion was sickeningly reversed. He was flung upward and to one side, and came down with a bone-shaking jolt.

He was knee-deep in the stuff that had broken his fall. It made a rustling, faintly skirring noise as he ploughed his way out of it.

He stumbled around what must have been a corner of the dark building from whose roof he had fallen. The shouts from above were shut off.

He dazedly headed for one of the bluish glows. It faintly outlined scrawny trees and rubbish-littered ground between him and it.

He was conscious of something strange about his body. Through the twinges and numbness caused by his fall, it obtruded itself—a feeling of pervasive ill-health and at the same time a sense of light, lean toughness of muscular fiber—both disturbingly unfamiliar.

He picked his way through the last of the rubbish and came out at the top of a terrace. The bluish glow was very strong now. It came from the nearest of a line of illuminators set on poles along a broad avenue at the foot of the terrace. A crowd of people were moving along the avenue, but a straggly hedge obscured his view.

He started down, then hesitated. The tangly stuff was still clinging to him. He automatically started to brush it off, and noted that it consisted of thin, springy spirals of plastic and metal—identical with the shavings from an old-style, presubtronic hyperlathe. Presumably a huge heap of the stuff had been vented from the funnel-mouths he had passed in his fall. Though it bewildered him to think how many hyperlathes must be in the dark building he was skirting, to produce so much scrap. Hyperlathes were obsolete, almost a curiosity. And to gather so many engines of any sort into one building was unthought of.

His mind was jarred off this problem by sight of his hands and clothing. They seemed strange—the former pallid, thin, heavy-jointed, almost clawlike.

Sharp but far away, as if viewed through a reducing glass, came memories of the evening's events. Clawly, the symchromy, the old man in black, the conference in the Sky Room, his plunge through the forest.

There was something clenched in his left hand—so tightly that the fingers opened with difficulty. It was the small gray sphere he had stolen at the Yggdrasil. He looked at it disturbedly. Surely, if he still had that thing with him, it meant that he couldn't have changed. And yet—

His mind filled with a formless but mounting foreboding.

Under the compulsion of that foreboding, he thrust the sphere into his pocket—a pocket that wasn't quite where it should be and that contained a metallic cylinder of unfamiliar feel. Then he ran down the terrace, pushed through the straggly hedge, and joined the crowd surging along the blue-litten avenue.

The foreboding became a tightening ball of fear, exploded into realization.

That other Thorn had changed places with him. He was wearing that other Thorn's clothing—drab, servile, workaday. He was inhab-

iting that other Thorn's body—his own but strangely altered and ill-cared-for, aquiver with unfamiliar tensions and emotions.

He was in the world of his nightmares.

He stood stock-still, staring, the crowd flowing around him, jostling him wearily.

His first reaction, after a giant buffet of amazement and awe that left him intoxicatedly weak, was one of deep-seated moral satisfaction. The balanced had at last been righted. Now that other Thorn could enjoy the good fortunes of utopia, while he endured that other Thorn's lot. There was no longer the stifling sense of being dominated by another personality, to whom misfortune and suffering had given the whiphand.

He was filled with an almost demoniac exhilaration—a desire to explore and familiarize himself with this world which he had long studied through the slits of nightmare, to drag from the drifting crowd around him an explanation as to its whys and wherefores.

But that would not be so easy.

An atmosphere of weary secrecy and suspicion pervaded the avenue. The voices of the people who jostled him dropped to mumbles as they went by. Heads were bowed or averted—but eyes glanced sharply.

He let himself move forward with the crowd, meanwhile studying it closely.

The misery and boredom and thwarted yearning for escape bluely shadowed in almost all the faces, was so much like that he remembered from his nightmares that he could easily pretend that he was dreaming—but only pretend.

There was a distorted familiarity about some of the faces that provided undiminishing twinges of horror. Those must be individuals whose duplicates in his own world he vaguely knew, or had glimpsed under different circumstances.

It was as if the people of his own world were engaged in acting out some strange pageant—perhaps a symbolic presentation dedicated to all the drab, monotonous, futile lives swallowed up in the muck of history.

They were dressed, both men and women, in tunic and trousers of some pale color that the blue light made it impossible to determine. There was no individuality—their clothes were all alike, although some seemed more like work clothes, others more like military uniforms.

Some seemed to be keeping watch on the others. These were treated with a mingled deference and hostility—way was made for them, but they were not spoken to. And they were spied on in turn—indeed, Thorn got the impression of an almost intolerably complex web of spying and counterspying.

Even more deference was shown to occasional individuals in dark clothing, but for a time Thorn did not get a close glimpse of any of these.

Everyone seemed on guard, wearily apprehensive.

Everywhere was the suggestion of an elaborate hierarchy of authority.

There was a steady drone of whispered or mumbled conversation.

One thing became fairly certain to Thorn before long. These people were going nowhere. All their uneasy drifting had no purpose except to fill up an empty period between work and sleep—a period in which some unseen, higher authority allowed them freedom, but forbid them from doing anything with it.

As he drifted along Thorn became more a part of the current, took on its coloring, ceased to arouse special suspicion. He began to overhear words, phrases, then whole fragments of dialogue. All of these had one thing in common: some mention of, or allusion to, the activities of a certain "they." Whatever the subject-matter, this pronoun kept cropping up. It was given a score of different inflections, none of them free from haunting anxiety and veiled resentment. There grew in Thorn's mind the image of an authority that was at once tyrannical, fatherly, arbitrary, austere, possessed of overpowering prestige, yet so familiar that it was never referred to in any more definite way.

"They've put our department on a twelve-hour shift."

The speaker was evidently a machinist. Anyway, a few hyperlathe shavings stuck to his creased garments.

His companion nodded. "I wonder what the new parts that are coming through are for."

"Something big."

"Must be. I wonder what they're planning."

"Something big."

"I guess so. But I wish we at least knew the name of what we're building."

No answer, except a tired, mirthless chuckle.

The crowd changed formation. Thorn found himself trailing behind another group, this time mostly elderly women.

"Our work-group has turned out over seven hundred thousand identical parts since the speed-up started. I've kept count."

"That won't tell you anything."

"No, but they must be getting ready for something. Look at how many are being drafted. All the forty-one-year-olds, and the thirty-seven-year-old women."

"They came through twice tonight, looking for Recalcitrants. They took Jon."

"Have you had the new kind of inspection? They line you up and ask you a lot of questions about who you are and what you're doing. Very simple questions—but if you don't answer them right, they take you away."

"That wouldn't help them catch Recalcitrants. I wonder who they're trying to catch now."

"Let's go back to the dormitory."

"Not for a while yet."

Another meaningless shift put Thorn next to a group containing a girl.

She said, "I'm going into the army tomorrow."

"Yes."

"I wish there were something different we could do tonight."

"Yes?"

"They won't let us do anything." A weak, whining note of rebellion entered her voice. "They have everything—powers like magic—they can fly—they live in the clouds, away from this horrible light. Oh, I wish—"

"Sh! They'll think you're a Recalcitrant. Besides, all this is temporary—they've told us so. There'll be happiness for everyone, as soon as the danger is over."

"I know—but why won't they tell us what the danger is?"

"There are military reasons. *Sh!"*

Someone who smiled maliciously had stolen up behind them, but Thorn did not learn the sequence to this interlude, if it had one, for yet another shift carried him to the other side of the avenue and put him near two individuals, a man and a woman, whose drab clothing was of the more soldierly cut.

"They say we may be going on maneuvers again next week. They've put a lot of new recruits in with us. There must be millions of us. I wish I knew what they were planning to do with us, when there's no enemy."

"Maybe things from another planet—"

"Yes, but that's just a rumor."

"Still, there's talk of marching orders coming any day now—complete mobilization."

"Yes, but against what?" The woman's voice had a faint overtone of hysteria. "That's what I keep asking myself at practice whenever I look through the slit and depress the trigger of the new gun—not knowing what it is that the gun will shoot or how it really works. I keep asking myself, over and over, what's going to be out there instead of the neat little target—what it is I'm going to kill. Until sometimes I think I'm going crazy. Oh Burk, there's something I've got to tell you, though I promised not to. I heard it yesterday—I mustn't tell who told me. It's that there's really a way of escape to that happier world we all dream of, if only you know how to concentrate your mind—"

"Sh!"

This time it was Thorn's eavesdropping that precipitated the warning.

He managed to listen in on many similar, smaller fragments to talk.

Gradually a change came over his mood—a complete change. His curiosity was not satisfied, but it was quenched. Oh, he had guessed several things from what he had heard, all right—in particular, that the "new kind of inspection" was designed to uncover displaced minds like his own, and that the "way of escape" was the one the other Thorn had taken—but this knowledge no longer lured him on. The fever of demoniac excitement had waned as swiftly as drunkenness, and left as sickening a depression in its wake. Normal human emotions were reasserting themselves—a shrinking from the ominous strangeness of the distorted world, and an aching, unreasoning, mountingly frantic desire to get back to familiar faces and scenes.

Bitter regret began to torture him for having deserted Clawly and his home-world because of the pressure of a purely personal moral problem. No knowing what confusions and dangers the other Thorn might weave for an unsuspecting Clawly. And upon Clawly alone, now that he was gone, the safety of the home-world depended. True,

if most of the displacing minds from this world were only those of oppressed individuals seeking escape, they would constitute no immediate unified danger. But if the shadowy, autocratic "they" were contemplating an invasion—that would be a very different matter.

The avenue, now skirting some sort of barren hillside, had become hateful to him. It was like a treadmill, and the glaring lights prevented any extended glimpse of the surrounding landscape. He would probably have left it soon in any case, even without sight of the jam-up ahead, where some sort of inspection of all walkers seemed to be going on. As it was, that sight decided him. He edged over to the side, waited for what he thought was a good opportunity, and ducked through the hedge.

Some minutes later, panting from concentrated exertion, his clothes muddied and grass-stained, he came out on the hilltop. The darkness and the familiar stars were a relief. He looked around.

His first impression was reassuring. For a moment it even roused in him the hope that, in his scramble up the hillside, the world had come right again. There, where it should be, was the Opal Cross. There were the Gray Twins. Concentrating on them, he could ignore the unpleasant suggestion of darker, squatter buildings bulging like slugs or beetles from the intervening countryside, could ignore even the meshwork of blue-litten, crawling avenues.

But the aerial bridge connecting the Twins must be darked out. Still, in that case the reflected light from the two towers ought to enable him to catch the outlines of either end of it.

And where was the Blue Lorraine? It didn't seem a hazy enough night to blot out that vast skylon.

Where, between him and the Twins, was the Mauve Z?

Shakingly he turned around. For a moment again his hope surged up. The countryside seemed clearer this way, and in the distance the Myrtle Y and the Gray H were like signposts of home.

But between him and them, rearing up from that very hillside where this evening he had watched the Yggdrasil, as if built in a night by jinn, was a great dark skylon, higher than any he had ever seen, higher even than the Blue Lorraine. It had an ebon shimmer. The main elements of its structure were five tapering wings radiating at equal intervals from a central tower. It looked like some symbol of pride and power conceived in the dreams of primeval kings.

A name came to him. The Black Star.

"Who are you up there? Come down!"

Thorn whirled around. The blue glare from the avenue silhouetted two men halfway up the hillside. Their heads were craned upward. The position of their arms suggested that they held weapons of some sort trained upon him.

He stood stock-still, conscious that the blue glow extended far enough to make him conspicuous. His senses were suddenly very keen. The present instant seemed to widen out infinitely, as if he and his two challengers were frozen men. It burst on him, with a dreadful certainty, that those men shouting on the roof had been trying to kill him. Save for the luck of overbalancing, he would this moment be a mangled cinder. The body he was in was one which other men were trying to kill.

"Come down at once!"

He threw himself flat. There was no needle of green, but something hissed faintly through the grass at his heels. He wriggled desperately for a few feet, then came up in a crouch and ran recklessly down the hillside away from the avenue.

Luck was with him. He kept footing in his crazy, breathless plunge through the semidark.

He entered thin forest, had to go more slowly. Leaves and fallen branches crackled under his feet. Straggly trees half blotted the stars.

All at once he became aware of shouting ahead. He turned, following a dry gravelly watercourse. But after a while there was shouting in that direction, too. Then something big swooped into the sky overhead and hung, and from it exploded blinding light, illumining the forest with a steady white glare crueler than day's.

He dove to cover in thick underbrush.

For a long time the hunt beat around him, now receding a little, now coming close. Once footsteps crunched in the gravel a dozen feet away.

The underbrush, shot through with the relentless white glare, seemed a most inadequate screen. But any attempt to change position would be very risky.

He hitched himself up a little to peer through the gaps in the leaves, and found that his right hand was clutching the metal cylinder he had felt in his pocket earlier. He must have snatched it out at some stage in his flight—perhaps an automatic response of his alien muscles.

He examined the thing, wondering if it were a weapon. He noted two controlling levers, but their function was unclear. As a last resort, he could try pointing the thing and pushing them.

A rustle of leaves snapped his attention to one of the leafy gaps. A figure had emerged on the opposite bank of the dried watercourse. It was turned away, but from the first there was something breathlessly familiar about the self-assured posture, the cock of the close-cropped, red-haired head.

The theatric glare struck an ebon shimmer from the uniform it was wearing, and outlined on one shoulder, of a somberer blackness than the uniform, a black star.

Thorn leaned forward, parting with his hand the brambly wall of his retreat.

The figure turned and the face became visible.

In a strangled voice—his first words since he had found himself on the roof-edge—Thorn cried out, "Clawly!" and rushed forward.

For a moment there was no change in Clawly's expression. Then, with feline agility, he sprang to one side. Thorn stumbled in the pitted streambed, dropped the metal cylinder. Clawly whipped out something and pointed it. Thorn started up toward him. Then—there was no sound save a faint hissing, no sight, but agonizing pain shot through Thorn's right shoulder.

And stayed. Lesser waves of it rippled through the rest of his body. He was grotesquely frozen in the act of scrambling upward. It was as if an invisible red-hot needle in Clawly's hand transfixed his shoulder and held him helpless.

Staring up in shocked, tortured dismay, the first glimmerings of the truth came to Thorn.

Clawly—*this* Clawly—smiled.

VII

There was the Door to which I found no Key;
There was the Veil through which I might not see:
The Rubaiyat.

Clawly quit his nervous prowling and perched on Oktav's desk. His satanic face was set in tight, thwarted lines. Except for his rummaging everything in the room was just as it had been when he had stolen

out early this morning. The outer door aslit, Oktav's black cloak thrown over the back of his chair, the door to the empty inner chamber open. As if the seer had been called away on some brief, minor errand.

Clawly was irked at the impulse which had drawn him back to this place. True, his rummaging had uncovered some suggestive and disquieting things—in particular, an assortment of small objects and implements that seemed to extend back without a break to the Late Middle Dawn Civilization, including a maddeningly random collection of notes that began in faded stain on sheets of bleached and compressed vegetable fiber, shifted to typed characters on similar sheets, kept on through engraving stylus and plastic film to memoranda ribbon and recording wire, and finally ended in multilevel writing tape.

But what Clawly wanted was something that would enable him to get a hook into the problem that hung before him like a vast, slippery, ungraspable sphere.

He still had, strong as ever, the conviction that this room was the center of a web, the key to the whole thing—but it was a key he did not know how to use.

His heels beat a muffled tattoo against the desk as he searched his mind for possible alternate avenues of attack.

Thorn? That was a whole problem in itself, only a few hours old, but full of the most nerve-racking possibilities. He took from his pouch and nervously fingered the fragment of tape with its scrawlingly recorded message which he had found earlier today on Thorn's desk at their office—that message which no one had seen Thorn leave.

A matter of the greatest importance has arisen. I must handle it alone. Will be back in a few days. Cancel or postpone all activities until my return.

Thorn.

Although the general style of recording was characteristically Thorn's, it had a subtly different swing to it, an alien undercurrent, as if some other mind were using Thorn's habitual patterns of muscular action. And the message itself, which might refer to anything, was alarmingly suggestive of a cryptic amnesiac's play for time.

On the other hand, it would be just like Thorn to play the lone wolf if he saw fit.

If he followed his simplest impulses, Clawly would resume the

search for Thorn he had begun on finding the message. But he had already put that search into the hands of agencies more competent than any single individual could possibly be. They would find Thorn if anyone could, and for him to try to help them would merely be a concession to his anxiety.

His heels beat a sharper tattoo.

The research program? But that was crippled by the Committee's adverse decision, and by Thorn's absence. He couldn't do much there. Besides he had the feeling that any research program was becoming too slow and remote a measure for dealing with the present situation.

The Committee itself? But what single, definite thing could he tell them that he had not told them last night?

His own mind, then? How about that as an avenue of attack? Stronger than ever before, the conviction came that there were dark avenues leading down from his consciousness—one of them to a frighteningly devilish, chaos-loving version of himself—and that if he concentrated his mind in a certain peculiar way he might be able to slip down one of them.

There was a devil-may-care lure to those dark avenues—the promise of a world better suiting the darker, Dawn phases of his personality. And, if Thorn *had* been displaced, that would be the only way of getting to him.

But that wasn't grappling with the problem. That was letting go, plunging with indefensible recklessness into the unknown—a crazy last resort.

To grapple with a problem, you had to have firm footing—and grab.

The tattoo ended with a sudden slam of heels. Was this room getting on his nerves? This silent room, with its feel of tangible linkages with future and past, its sense of standing on the edge of a timeless, unchanging center of things, in which action had no place—sapping his will power, rendering him incapable of making a decision, now that there was no longer a seer to interpret for him.

The problem was in one sense so clear-cut. Earth threatened by invasion from across a new kind of frontier.

But to get a grip on that problem.

He leaned across the desk and flipped the televisor, riffling through various local scenes in the Blue Lorraine. The Great Rotunda, with

its aerial promenade, where a slow subtronic current carried chatting, smiling throngs in an upward spiral past displays of arts and wares. The Floral Rotunda, where pedestrians strolled along gently rolling paths under arches of exotic greenery. The other formal social centers. The endless corridors of individual enterprises, where one might come upon anything from a puppet-carver's to a specialized subtronic lab, a mood-creator's to a cat-fancier's. The busy schools. The production areas, where keen-eyed machine tenders governed and artistically varied the flow of processing. The maintenance and replacement centers. The vast kitchens, where subtle cooks ruled to a hairbreadth the mixing of foodstuffs and their exposure to heat and moisture and other influences. The entertainment and games centers, where swirling gaiety and high-pitched excitement were the rule.

Everywhere happiness—or, rather, creative freedom. A great rich surging world, unaware, save for nightmare glimpses, of the abyss-edge on which it danced.

Maddeningly unaware.

Clawly's features writhed. Thus, he thought, the Dawn gods must have felt when looking down upon mankind the evening before Ragnarok.

To be able to shake those people out of their complacency, make them aware of danger!

The seer's words returned to him: "Arm it. Mobilize it. Do not let it wait supine for the hunter— You must give it a reason . . . extemporize a danger—Mars."

Mars! The seer's disappearance had caused Clawly to miss the idea behind the word, but now, remembering, he grasped it in a flash. A faked Martian invasion. Doctored reports from the First Interplanetary Expedition—mysterious disappearance of spaceships—unknown craft approaching Earth—rumor of a vast fleet—running fights in the stratosphere—

Firemoor of the Extraterrestrial Service was his friend, and believed in his theories. Moreover, Firemoor was daring—even reckless. Many of the young men under him were of similar temperament. The thing could be done!

Abruptly Clawly shook his head, scowled. Any such invasion scare would be a criminal hoax. It was a notion that must have been forced

upon him by the darker, more wantonly mischievous side of his nature —or by some lingering hypnotic influence of Oktav.

And yet—

No! He must forget the notion. Find another way.

He slid from the desk, began to pace. Opposition. That was what he needed. Something concrete to fight against. Something, some person, some group, that was opposed to him, that was trying to thwart him at every turn.

He stopped, wondering why he had not thought of it before.

There were two men who were trying to thwart him, who had shrewdly undermined his and Thorn's theories, two men who had shown an odd personality reversal in the past months, who had impressed him with a fleeting sense of strangeness and alienage.

Two members of the World Executive Committee.

Conjerly and Tempelmar.

Brushing the treetops, swooping through leaf-framed gaps, startling a squirrel that had been dozing on an upper branch, Clawly glided into the open and made a running landing on the olive-floored sun-deck of Conjerly's home.

It was very quiet. There was only the humming of some bees in the flower garden, up from which sweet, heavy odors drifted sluggishly and curled across the deck. The sun beat down. On all sides without a break, the trees—solid masses of burnished leaves—pressed in.

Clawly crossed quietly to the dilated doorway in the cream-colored wall. He did not remove his flying togs. His visor he had thrown open during flight.

Raising his hand, he twice broke the invisible beam spanning the doorway. A low musical drone sounded, was repeated.

There was no answering sound, no footsteps. Clawly waited.

The general quiet, the feeling of lifelessness, made his abused nerves twitch. Forest homes like this, reached only by flying, were devilishly lonely and isolated.

Then he became aware of another faint, rhythmic sound, which the humming of the bees had masked. It came from inside the house. Throaty breathing. The intervals between breaths seemed abnormally long.

Clawly hesitated. Then he smoothly ducked under the beam.

He walked softly down a dark, cool corridor. The breathing grew steadily louder, though there was no change in its labored, sighing monotony. Opposite the third opened doorway the increase in volume was abrupt.

As his eyes became accustomed to the semidarkness, he made out a low couch and the figure of a man sprawled on it, on his back, arms dropped to either side, pale blob of bald head thrown limply back. At intervals the vague face quivered with the slow-paced breathing.

Clawly fumbled sideways, switched on a window, went over to the couch.

On the floor, under Conjerly's hand, was a deflated elastoid bag. Clawly picked it up, sniffed, quickly averted his head from the faintly pungent soporific odor.

He shook the bulky sleeper, less gently after a moment.

It did not interrupt the measured snores.

The first impression of Conjerly's face was one of utter emptiness, the deep-grooved wrinkles of character and emotion a network of disused roads. But on closer examination, hints of personality became dimly apparent, as if glimpsed at the bottom of a smudgy pool.

The longer Clawly studied them, the surer he became that the suspicions he had clutched at so eagerly in Oktav's office were groundless. This was the Conjerly he had known. Unimaginative perhaps, stubborn and blunt, a little too inclined to conservatism, a little too fond of curling down those deep furrows at the corners of the mouth—but nothing alien, nothing malign.

The rhythm of the breathing changed. The sleeper stirred. One hand came slowly up, brushed blindly at the chest.

Clawly watched motionlessly. From all sides the heavy summery silence pressed in.

The rhythm of the breathing continued to change. The sleeper tossed. The hand fumbled restlessly at the neck of the loose houserobe.

And something else changed. It seemed to Clawly as if the face of the Conjerly he knew were sinking downward into a narrow bottomless pit, becoming tiny as a cameo, vanishing utterly, leaving only a hollow mask. And then, as if another face were rising to fill the mask —and in this second face, if not malignity, at least grim and unswervingly hostile purpose.

The sleeper mumbled, murmured. Clawly bent low, caught words. Words with a shuddery, unplacable quality of distance to them, as if they came from another cosmos.

". . . transtime machine . . . invasion . . . three days . . . we . . . prevent action . . . until—"

Then, from the silence behind him, a different sound—a faint crunch.

Clawly whirled. Standing in the doorway, filling half its width and all its height, was Tempelmar.

And in Tempelmar's lean, horselike face the vanishing flicker of a look in which suspicion, alarm, and a more active emotion were blended—a lethal look.

But by the time Clawly was looking straight at him, it had been replaced by an urbane, condescending, eyebrow-raising "Well?"

Again a sound from behind. Turning, backing a little so that he could take in both men at once, Clawly saw that Conjerly was sitting up, rubbing his face. He took away his hands and his small eyes stared at Clawly—blankly at first. Then his expression changed too, became a "Well?"—though more angry, indignant, less urbane. It was an expression that did not belong to the man who had lain there drugged.

The words Clawly had barely caught were still humming in his ears.

Even as he phrased his excuse—". . . came to talk wtih you about the program . . . heard sounds of distressed breathing . . . alarmed . . . walked in . . ."—even as he considered the possibility of immediate physical attack and the best way to meet it, he came to a decision.

He would see Firemoor.

VIII

In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
The Duchess of Malfi, John Webster.

With bent shoulders, sunken head, paralyzed arm still dangling at his side, Thorn crouched uncomfortably in his lightless cell, as if the whole actual weight of the Black Star—up to the cold, cloud-piercing pinnacle where "they" held council—were upon him. His mind was tired to the breaking point, oppressed by the twisted, tyrannous world into which he had blundered, by the aching body not his own, by the

brain which refused to think his thoughts in the way he wanted to think them.

And yet, in a sense, the human mind is tireless—an instrument built for weary decades of uninterrupted thinking and dreaming. And so Thorn continued to work on, revolving miseries, regrets, and fears, striving to unlock the stubborn memory chambers of the unfamiliar brain, turning from that to equally hopeless efforts to make plans. Mostly it struggled nightmarishly with the problem of escape back to his own world, and with the paradoxical riddles which that problem involved. He must, Thorn told himself, still be making partial use of his brain back in World I—to give it a name—just as Thorn II—to give him a name—must be making use of these locked memory chambers. All thought had to be based on a physical brain; it couldn't go on in emptiness. Also, since Universes I and II—to give them names—were independent, self-contained space-time set-ups, they couldn't have an ordinary spatial relationship—they couldn't be far from or near to each other. The only linkage between them seemed to be the mental ones between quasiduplicate brains, and such linkages would not involve distance in any common sense of the term. His transition into World II had seemed to take place instantaneously; hence, pragmatically speaking, the two universes could be considered as superimposed on each other. Whether he was in one or the other was just a matter of viewpoint.

So near and yet so far. So diabolically similar to attempts to wake from a nightmare—and the blackness of his cell increased the similarity. All he had to do was summon up enough mental energy, find sufficient impetus, to force a re-exchange of viewpoints between himself and Thorn II. And yet as he struggled and strained through seeming eternities in the dark, as he strove to sink, to plunge, down the dark channels of the subconscious and found them closed, as he felt out the iron resistances of that other Thorn, he began to think the effort impossible—even began to wonder if World I were not just the wishful dream of a scarred, hunted, memoryless man in a world where invisible tyrants plotted un-understandable invasions, commanded the building of inexplicable machines, and bent millions to their wholly cryptic will.

At least, whatever the sufficient impetus was, he could not find it.

A vertical slit of light appeared, widened to a square, revealed a long

corridor. And in it, flanked by two black-uniformed guards, the other Clawly.

So similar was the dapper figure to the Clawly he knew—rigged out in a strange costume and acting in a play—that it was all he could do not to spring up with a friendly greeting.

And then, to think that this Clawly's mind was linked to the other's, that somewhere, just across its subconscious, his friend's thoughts moved— Dizzying. He stared at the trim, ironic face with a terrible fascination.

Clawly II spoke. "Consider yourself flattered. I'm going to deliver you personally to the Servants of the People. They'll want to be the ones to decide, in your case, between immediate self-sacrifice, assisted confession, or what not." He chuckled without personal malice. "The Servants have devised quite amusing euphemisms for Death and Torture, haven't they? The odd thing is, they seem to take them seriously —the euphemisms, I mean."

The uniformed guards, in whose stolid faces were written years of unquestioning obedience to incomprehensible orders, did not laugh. If anything, they looked shocked.

Thorn staggered up and stepped slowly forward, feeling that by that action he was accepting a destiny not of his own making but as inescapable as all destinies are, that he was making his entrance, on an unknown stage, into an unknown play. They started down the corridor, the guards bringing up the rear.

"You make rather a poorer assassin than I'd have imagined, if you'll pardon the criticism," Clawly II remarked after a moment. "That screaming my name to get me off guard—a very ill-advised dodge. And then dropping your weapon in the streambed. No—you can't exactly call it competent. I'm afraid you didn't live up to your reputation of being the most dangerous of the Recalcitrants. But then, of course, you were fagged."

Thorn sensed something more in the remarks than courteous knife-twisting. Undeniably, Clawly II was vaguely aware of something off-key, and was probing for it. Thorn tightened his guard, for he had decided on at least one thing in the dark—that he would not reveal that he was a displaced mind, except to escape some immediate doom. It might be all right if they would consider him insane. But he was reasonably certain they would not.

Clawly II looked up at him curiously. "Rather silent, aren't you? Last time we met, as I recall, you denounced me—or was it the things I stood for?—in the most bitter language, though with admirable restraint. Can it be that you're beginning to reconsider the wisdom of recalcitrance? Rather late for that, I'm afraid."

He waited a while. Then, "It's you that hate me, you know. I hate no one." He caught Thorn's involuntary grimace, the twitch of the shoulder from which hung the paralyzed right arm. "Oh, I sometimes hurt people, but that's mainly adjustment to circumstances—quite another thing. My ideal, which I've pretty well achieved, is to become so perfectly adjusted to circumstances that I float freely on the stream of life, unannoyed by any tugs of hate, love, fear, caution, guilt, responsibility, and so forth—all the while enjoying the spectacle and occasionally poking in a finger."

Thorn winced—Clawly II's remarks were so similar to those which Clawly I sometimes made when he was in a banteringly bitter mood. Certainly the man must have some sort of suspicions and be trying to draw him out—he'd never talk so revealingly otherwise. Beyond that, there was the suggestion that Clawly II was bothered by certain unaccustomed feelings of sympathy and was trying to get to the bottom of them. Perhaps the independence of quasi-duplicate minds wasn't as complete as it had at first appeared. Perhaps Clawly I's emotions were obscurely filtering through to Clawly II. It was all very confusing, unnervingly so, and Thorn was relieved when their entry into a large room postponed the moment when he would have to decide on a line of answers.

It was an arresting room, chiefly because it was divided into two areas in which two separate ways of life held sway, as clearly as if there had been a broad white line extending across the middle, with the notice, "Thou shalt not pass." On this side was quite a crowd of people, most of them sitting around on benches, a few in black uniforms, the rest in servile gray. They were all obviously waiting—for orders, permissions, judgments, interviews. They displayed, to an exaggerated degree, that mixture of uneasiness and boredom characteristic of people who must wait. Four words sprang to Thorn's mind, summing them up. *They did not know.*

On the other side were fewer people—a bare half dozen, seated at various desks. Their superiority was not obviously displayed. Their

clothing was, if anything, drabber and more severe, and the furnishings they used were in no way luxurious. But something in their manner, something in the way they glanced speculatively up from their work, put gulfs between them and those who uneasily waited. This time only two words were needed. *They knew.*

Clawly II's arrival seemed to cause an increase in the uneasiness. At least, Thorn caught several frightened glances, and sensed a general relaxing of tension when it became obvious that Clawly II's mission did not concern anyone here. He also noted that the two guards seemed relieved when Clawly dismissed them.

One other glance he thought he caught was of a perplexingly different sort. It was directed at him rather than Clawly II. It came from an elderly, gray-clad man, whose face awoke no sense of recognition either in this world or his own. It conveyed, if he was not mistaken, sympathy, anxiety, and—strangest of all—*loyalty*. Still, if Thorn II had been some sort of rebel leader, the incident was understandable. Thorn quailed, wondering if he had put himself into the position of betraying a worthy movement in this world as well as his own.

Clawly II seemed to be a person of reputation on the other side of the room as well, for his clipped, "To the Servants' Hall, with a person for the Servants," passed them through without a question.

They entered another corridor, and their surroundings began to change very rapidly. A few paces brought them to a subtronic tube. Thorn was glad that he was startled into moving jerkily when the upward-surging current gripped them, for a glance at Clawly II warned him that it would not be well to show much familiarity with this form of transportation.

And now, for the first time since his plunge into World II, Thorn's mind began to work with clarity. It may have been the soothing familiarity of the current.

Obviously, in World II subtronic power was the closely guarded possession of a ruling elite. There had been no evidence at all of its employment on the other side of the dividing line. Moreover, that would explain why the workers and soldiers on the other side were kept ignorant of the true nature and theory of at least some of the instruments they constructed or used. It would also explain the need for the vast amount of work—there were two ways of life, based on entirely different power-systems, to be maintained.

Then as to the relationship between Worlds I and II. For closely re-

lated they must be—it was unthinkable that two eternally independent universes could have produced two near-identical Opal Crosses, Gray Twins, Clawlys, Thorn, and an uncounted host of other similars; if one granted that possibility, one would have to grant anything. No—Worlds I and II must be the results of a split in the time-stream, however caused, and a fairly recent split at that, for the two worlds contained duplicate individuals and it was again unthinkable that, if the split had occurred as much as a hundred years ago, the same individuals would have been born in the two worlds—the same gametes, under different circumstances, still uniting to form the same zygotes.

The split must—of course!—have occurred when the nightmare-increase began in World I. About thirty years ago.

But—Thorn's credulity almost rebelled—would it have been possible for two worlds to become so different in a short time? Freedom in one, tyranny in the other. Decent people in one, emotional monsters and cringing, embittered underlings in the other. It was horrible to think that human nature, especially the nature of people you loved and respected, could be so much the toy of circumstance.

And yet—the modern world was keyed for change. Wars could, had, come overnight. Sweeping technological changes had been accomplished in a few months. And granting such an immense initial difference as the decision to keep subtronic power a government secret in World II, to make it public property in World I—

Moreover, there was a way of testing. Without pausing to consider, Thorn said, "Remember when we were children? We used to play together. Once we swore an oath of undying friendship."

Clawly II twisted toward him in the current, which was now taking them up past winking corridor entries.

"You *are* breaking," he remarked in surprise. "I never expected a play for sympathy. Yes, of course I remember."

"And then about two years later," Thorn plunged on, "when our glider dropped in the lake and I was knocked out, you towed me ashore."

Clawly II laughed, but the puzzled look around his eyes deepened. "Did you really believe I saved you? It hardly fits with your behavior toward me afterwards. No, as I think you know, I swam ashore. That was the day on which I first realized that I was I, and that everything and everybody else was circumstances."

Thorn shivered, as much in horror of this changeling beside him as in satisfaction at having checked the date of the time-split. Then he felt revulsion rising in him, more from the body he occupied than from his own thoughts.

"There isn't room in the world for even two people with that attitude," he heard himself challenge bitterly.

"Yes, but there is room for one," Clawly II replied laughingly. Then he frowned and continued hesitatingly, as if against his better judgment. "Look, why don't you try the same thing? Your only chance with the Servants is to make yourself useful to them. Remember, they too are just something to be adjusted to."

For a moment it seemed to Thorn as if Clawly I were striving to look through the eyes of Clawly II. As he tried to gain control of the baffling jumble of emotions this sensation produced, Clawly II took him by the arm and steered them into the slower periphery of the current, then into a dead-current area before the mouth of a short pedestrian corridor.

"No talk from here on," he warned Thorn. "But remember my advice."

There were calculatingly eyed guards inside the corridor mouth, but again a mere "With a person for the Servants" passed them in.

A low, gray door, without numeral or insignia, blocked the end of the corridor. Some yards short of it was a narrow side-door. Clawly II touched something and the side-door opened. Thorn followed him through it. After a few paces down a dim, curving passageway, they came to a large room, but Clawly II stopped them just short of it. Again he touched something. A door slid silently out of the wall behind them, changing the end of the passageway into a dark niche in the room ahead. Signing to Thorn that they were to wait and watch, Clawly II leaned back with a slow speculative smile.

IX

Black Star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
John Keats (with an ironic alteration).

It was a notably bare room, smaller and lower-ceilinged than he had expected. It was furnished with ostentatious simplicity, and nothing broke the gray monotony of the walls.

Around the longer side of a kidney-shaped table, eleven men sat on stools. Their gray tunics, though clean, were like those of beggars. They were all old, some bald, some capped with close-cropped white or gray. They all sat very erect.

The first thing that struck Thorn—with surprise, he realized—was that the Servants of the People looked in no way malignant, villainous, or evil.

But looking at them a second time, Thorn began to wonder if there was not something worse. A puritanic grimness that knew no humor. A suffocating consciousness of responsibility, as if all the troubles of the world rested on their shoulders alone. A paternal aloofness, as if everyone else were an irresponsible child. A selflessness swollen to such bounds as to become supreme selfishness. An intolerable sense of personal importance that their beggarly clothes and surroundings only emphasized.

But Thorn had barely gleaned this impression, had had no time to survey the faces in detail, except to note that one of two seemed vaguely familiar, when his attention became riveted on the man who was standing on the other side of the table, the focus of their converging eyes.

That man was obviously one of them. His manner and general appearance were the same.

But that man was also Conjerly.

He was speaking. "I must return at once. The soporific I inhaled into my other body will wear off shortly, and if the other mind becomes conscious, exchange will be difficult. True, Tempelmar is on guard there and could administer another dose. But that is dangerous. Understand, we will attempt no further exchanges unless it becomes necessary to transmit to you information of vital importance. The process is too risky. There is always the possibility of the mental channels being blocked, and one or both of us being marooned here."

"You are wise," observed the midmost of the Servants, apparently their chairman, a tall thin man with wrinkle-puckered lips. "No further exchanges should be necessary. I anticipate no emergencies."

"And so I take my leave," Conjerly continued, "assured that the trans-time machine is ready and that the invasion will begin in three days, at the hour agreed. We will prevent the World Executive Committee from taking any significant action until then."

Thorn leaned forward, half guessing what was coming. Clawly II's hand touched his sleeve.

Conjerly bowed his head, stood there rigid. Two black-uniformed guards appeared and took up positions close to him, one on either side.

For a full half minute nothing happened.

Then a great shiver went through Conjerly. He slumped forward, would have fallen except for the two guards. He hung in their arms, breathing heavily.

When he raised his face, Thorn saw that it had a different expression, was that of a different man. A man who looked dazed and sick.

"Where—? Who?" he mumbled thickly. The guards began to lead him out. Then his eyes cleared. He seemed to recognize the situation. "Don't lock me up. Let me explain," he cried out, his voice racked by a desperate yet hopeless urgency. "My name's Conjerly. I'm a member of the World Executive Committee." His face, twisted back over his shoulder, was a white, uncomprehending mask. "Who are you? What do you want out of me? Why am I drugged? What have you done to my body? What are you trying to do to my mind? What—"

The guards dragged him out.

The wrinkle-lipped chairman lowered his eyes. "A distressing occurrence. But, of course, strictly necessary. It is good to think that, when we have things under control in the other world, no such confinements and withholdings of permissible information will have to be practiced—except, of course, in the case of hopeless Recalcitrants."

The others nodded silently. Then Thorn started, for from beside him came an amused, incredulous snicker—not a polite or pleasant sound, and certainly unexpected.

All eyes were turned in their direction.

Clawly II strode out leisurely.

"What did your laughter signify?" the chairman asked sharply, without preliminaries, a look of displeasure settling on his face. "And who is that you have smuggled into our council, without informing us? Let me tell you, some day you will go too far in your disregard of regulations."

Clawly II ignored the second question—and the comment. He swaggered up to the table, planted his hands on it, looked them over, and said, "I laughed to think of how sincerely you will voice your distress when you discover all inhabitants of the other world to be hopeless

Recalcitrants—and take appropriate measures. Come, face circumstances. You will be forced to destroy most of the inhabitants of the other world, and you know it."

"We know nothing of the sort," replied the chairman coldly. "Take care that your impudent and foolish opinions do not make us lose confidence in you. In these critical times your shrewdness and ingenuity are valuable to us. You are a useful tool, and only imprudent men destroy a tool because its mannerisms annoy them. But if, in your foolhardy opinionatedness you cease to be useful—that is another matter. As regards the misguided inhabitants of the other world, you very well know that our intentions are the best."

"Of course," agreed Clawly II, smiling broadly, "but just consider what's actually going to happen. In three days the trans-time machine will subtronically isolate and annihilate a spatio-temporal patch in this world, setting up stresses which cannot be relieved by any redistribution of material in this world; accordingly the lacuna will find with the corresponding patch from the other world, thereby creating an area common to both worlds. Through this common area your armed forces will pour. They will come as invaders, awakening horror and fear. They will have the element of surprise on their side, but there will inevitably be resistance—organized in desperate haste, but using improvised subtronic weapons. Most important, that resistance will not come, as it would in this world, from a small elite directing an ignorant multitude, but from a people of uniformly high education—a people used to freedom and adverse to submitting to any autocratic government, no matter how well-intentioned. That resistance will not cease until the other world has been destroyed in subtronic battle, or you are forced to destroy it subtronically yourselves and retire through the gap. All that is painfully clear."

"It is nothing of the sort," replied the chairman in measured and dispassionate tones. "Our invasion will be well-nigh bloodless, though we must prepare for all eventualities. At the proper moment Conjerly and Tempelmar will seize control of the so-called World Executive Committee, thereby preventing any organized resistance at the fountainhead. The majority of inhabitants of the other world have no technical knowledge of subtronic power and will therefore constitute no danger. Ultimately they will be grateful to us for insuring the safety of their world and protecting them from their irresponsible leaders. It

will only be necessary for us to capture and confine all technicians and scientists having a knowledge of subtronic physics. To do this, we must admittedly be ready to take any and all necessary steps, no matter how unpleasant. For our main purpose, of which we never lose sight, is always to keep the knowledge of subtronic power—which now imperils two worlds—in the possession of a small, responsible, and benevolent elite."

Thorn shivered. The horrible thing was that these Servants actually believed that they were acting for the best, that they had the good of mankind—of two mankinds—at heart.

"Exactly," said Clawly II, continuing to smile. "The only thing you don't see, or pretend not to see, is the inevitable consequences of that main purpose. Even now your secrets are gravely endangered. Mind-exchange is putting more and more Recalcitrants and Escapists into the other world. It is only a matter of time before some of them begin to realize that the inhabitants of that world are their potenial allies rather than their foes, and join forces with them. Similarly it is only a matter of time until the mind of a subtronic technician is displaced into this world and contacted by the Recalcitrants here—then you will have to fight subtronic wars in two worlds. Your only chance, as I'm glad you recognize in part, is to strike hard and fast, destroy the other world, along with all the Recalcitrants and Escapists who have entered it, then seek out and eliminate all displaced minds in this world. Your weakness is in not admitting this at the start. Everything would be much easier if you would leave out pseudobenevolent intentions and recognize that you are up against an equation in destruction, which you must solve in the only logical way possible—by a general canceling out."

And he rocked back on his heels a little, again surveying the eleven old faces. It struck Thorn that thus legendary Loke must have mocked the Dawn Gods and flayed their high-sounding pretenses, confident that his cunning and proven usefulness would protect him from their wrath. As for the Servants, their paternalism was unpleasantly apparent in their attitude toward Clawly II. They treated him like a brilliantly mischievous favorite child—always indulged, often threatened, seldom punished.

Certainly there was a germ of greatness about this Clawly II. If only

he had Clawly I's sane attitude toward life, so that his critical thinking would come to something more than mere sardonic jibing!

One thing was certain, Clawly II's claim that he wanted to float on the stream of life was a gross understatement. What he really wanted was to dance along a precipice—and this time, apparently, he had taken one heedless step too many.

For the chairman looked at him and said, "The question arises whether your insistence on destruction has not assumed the proportions of a mania. We will at once reconsider your usefulness as a tool."

Clawly II bowed. He said smoothly, "First it would be well to interview the person I have brought you. You will be pleased when I tell you who he is." And he motioned to Thorn.

All eyes turned on the niche.

Abruptly, painfully, Thorn woke from his impersonal absorption in the scene unrolling before him. Again it came to him, like a hammer blow, that he was not watching from the safety of a spy-hole, but was himself immediately and fatally involved. Again the urge to escape racked him—with redoubled force, because of the warning that he must now at all costs take back to World I. It was such a simple thing. Just a change of viewpoints. He had seen Conjerly accomplish it. Surely, if he concentrated his mind in the right way, it would be that other Thorn who walked forward to face the Servants and the destiny of that other Thorn's own making, while he sank back. Surely his need to warn a world would give him sufficient impetus.

But all the time he was walking toward the table. It was *his* dragging feet that scuffed the gray flooring, *his* dry throat that swallowed, *his* cold hands that clenched and unclenched. The eleven old faces wavered, blurred, came clear again, seemed to swell, grow gray and monstrous, become the merciless masks of judges of some fabled underworld, where he must answer for another man's crimes.

The table stopped his forward progress. He heard Clawly II say, "I am afraid that I am still very useful to you. Here is your chief enemy, brought to book by my efforts alone. He was part of our bag when he raided the local Recalcitrant headquarters last night. He escaped and took to the hills, where I personally recaptured him—the Recalcitrant leader Thorn 37-P-82."

But the Servants' reaction could not have been the one Clawly was

expecting, for the old faces registered anger and alarm. "Irresponsible child!" the chairman rapped out. "Didn't you hear what Conjerly reported—that he is certain there has occurred a mind exchange between the Thorns? This man is not the Recalcitrant, but a displaced mind come to spy on us. You have provided him with what he wanted—an opportunity to learn our plans."

Thorn felt their converging hostility—a palpable force. His mind shrank back from the windows of his eyes, but, chained there, continued to peer through them.

The chairman's wrinkled hand dropped below the table. He said, "There is only one course of action." His hand came up, and in it a slim gleaming cone. "To eliminate the displaced mind before a re-exchange can be—"

Thorn was dimly conscious of Clawly II leaping forward. He heard him begin, "No! Wait! Don't you see—"

But although that was all he heard, he knew what Clawly II was going to say and why he was going to say it. He also knew why Thorn II had been able to exchange with him when Thorn II thought he was trapped and facing death on the rooftop. He knew that the chairman's action was the very thing that would nullify the chairman's purpose. At last he had found the sufficient impetus—it was staring at him down the slim, gleaming cone, leering at him even as the chains broke and his mind dropped back from the windows of his eyes into a black, dimensionless pit.

The fear of death.

I.

Three roots there are that three ways run
'Neath the ash-tree Yggdrasil;
'Neath the first lives Hel, 'neath the second the frost giants,
'Neath the last are the lands of men.

Elder Edda.

Thorn did not ask himself why his resting place was dark and stuffy, rocky and dry, or where the stale, sour smell of woodsmoke came from. He was content to lie there and let his mind snuggle down into his body, lull itself with simple sensations, forget the reverberations of its

terrible journey. World II still clung to him sluggishly. But like a nightmare from which one has wakened, it could be disregarded.

In a moment he would rouse himself and do what must be done. In a moment, he knew, he would know no peace until the warning had been given and all essential steps taken, until the invasion had been met and decisively thrown back. He would be a creature of tension, of duty, of war.

But for the moment nothing mattered, nothing could break his sense of peace.

Odd, though, that the heavy woodsmoke did not make him cough, and that his body was not aching from its cramped position and rocky crouch.

Muffledly, as if its source were underground, came a distant howling, melancholy and long-drawn-out, ending on a low note of menace.

He started up. His shielding hand encountered a low ceiling of rock, hurriedly traced it to jagged, sloping walls on either side.

It was he that was underground, not the howling.

What the devil had Thorn II been doing in a cave in World I? Why was he wearing this odd jumble of heavy clothing, that seemed to include thick, stiff boots and furs? Where had he gotten the long knife that was stuck in his belt?

The cramping darkness was suddenly full of threats. In panicky haste he continued his feeling-out of the walls, found that he was in a small domed chamber, high enough in the center so that he could almost stand upright. On three sides the walls extended down to the uneven floor, or to the mouths of horizontal crevices too narrow to stick more than an arm in.

On the fourth side was a low opening. By getting down on hands and knees he could wriggle in.

It led slightly upward. The smell of woodsmoke grew heavier. After two sharp turns, where jagged edges caught but did not tear his heavy clothing, he began to see the gray gleam of daylight.

The roof of the passageway grew higher, so that he could almost walk upright. Then it suddenly opened into a larger chamber, the other end of which was completely open to a gloomy landscape.

This landscape consisted of a steep hillside of granite boulders and wind-warped pines, all patched with snow. At a middle distance, as if across a ravine.

But Thorn did not inspect it closely, for he was looking chiefly at the fire blocking the mouth of the narrow passageway, sending up smoke that billowed back from the ceiling, making the day even more gloomy and dim.

It immediately struck him as being a very remarkable fire, though he couldn't say why. After a while he decided that it was because it had been very cleverly constructed to burn steadily for a long time, some of the logs and branches being so placed that they would not fall into the fire until others had been consumed. Whoever had built that fire must have painstakingly visualized just how it was going to burn over a period of several hours.

But why should he waste time admiring a fire? He kicked it aside with the clumsy boots Thorn II had dug up God knows where, and strode to the mouth of the cave.

Claws skirred on rock, and he had the impression of a lithe furry animal whisking off to one side.

The cave opened on a hillside, similar to the one opposite and slanting down to a twisting, ice-choked stream. Overhead a gray, dreary sky seemed to be trending toward nightfall. The walls of the ravine shut off any more distant horizon. It was very cold.

The scene was hauntingly familiar.

Had Thorn II been insane, or gone insane? Why else should he have hidden himself in a cave in a near-arctic wild-life reserve? For that certainly seemed to be what he had done, despite the difficulty in picturing just how he had managed to do it in so short a time.

A fine thing if, after getting back to his rightful world, he should starve to death in a reserve, or be killed by some of the formidable animals with which they were stocked.

He must climb the hill behind him. Wherever he was, he'd be able to sight a beacon or skylon from its top.

It suddenly occurred to him that this ravine was devilishly like one in the woodland near the symchromy amphitheater, a ravine in which he and Clawly used to go exploring when they were boys. There was something unforgettably distinctive about the pattern of the streambed.

But that couldn't be. The weather was all wrong. And that ravine was much more thickly wooded. Besides, erosion patterns were always repeating themselves.

He started to examine the queer, bulky clothing Thorn II had been wearing. In doing so, he got one good look at his hands—and stopped.

He stood for a long moment with his eyes closed. Even when soft paws pattered warily somewhere over his head and a bit of gravel came trickling down, he did not jerk.

Rapidly the determination grew in his mind that he must get to the hilltop and establish his position before he did anything else, before he thought anything else, certainly before he examined his hands or his face more closely. It was more a terror-inspired compulsion than a determination. He stepped to the rocky lip in front of the cave, and looked back. Again there was the impression of a gray, furry animal streaking for cover. Something about the size of a cat. He hurriedly surveyed the routes leading upward, picked one that seemed to slope more gradually and avoid the steeper barren stretches, and immediately started up it at a scrambling trot, his eyes fixed resolutely ahead.

But after he had gone a little way, he saw something that made him stop and stare despite the compulsion driving him.

On a pine-framed boulder about a dozen yards ahead, to one side of the route he was taking, three cats sat watching him.

They were cats, all right, house cats, though they seemed to be of a particularly thick-furred breed.

But one wouldn't normally find house cats on a wild-life reserve. Their presence argued the nearness of human habitation. Moreover, they were eying him with a poised intentness that indicated some kind of familiarity, and did not fit with their earlier racing for cover—if those had been the same animals.

He called, "Kitty!" His voice cracked a little. "Kitty!"

The sound drifted thinly across the hillside, as if congealed by the cold.

And then the sound was answered, or rather echoed, by the cat to the right, a black and gray.

It was not exactly the word "Kitty" that the cat mi auled, but it was a sound so like it, so faithful to his exact intonations, that his flesh crawled.

"Kii . . . eee." Again the eerily mocking, mimicking challenge rang out.

He was afraid.

He started forward again. At the first scrape of his boots on gravel, the cats vanished.

For some time he made fast, steady progress, although the going was by no means easy, sometimes leading along the rims of landslides, sometimes forcing him to fight his way through thick clumps of scrub trees. The last "Kii . . . eee" stuck in his ears, and at times he was pretty sure he glimpsed furry bodies slipping along to one side, paralleling his progress. His thoughts went off on unpleasant tacks, chiefly about the degree to which careful breeding had increased the intelligence of house cats, the way in which they had always maintained their aloof and independent life in the midst of man's civilization, and other less concrete speculations.

Once he heard another sound, a repetition of the melancholy howling that had first startled him in the cave. It might have been wolves, or dogs, and seemed to come from somewhere low in the ravine and quite a distance away.

The sky was growing darker.

The rapid ascent was taking less out of him than he would have imagined. He was panting, but in a steady, easy way. He felt he could keep up this pace for a considerable distance.

The pines began to thin on the uphill side. He emerged onto a long, wide slope that stretched, ever-steepening, boulder-strewn but almost barren of vegetation, to the ravine's horizon. His easiest way lay along its base, past tangled underbrush.

A little distance ahead and up the slope, a large chunk of granite jutted out. On its rim sat three cats, again regarding him. Something about the way they were turned toward each other, the little movements they made, suggested that they were holding a conference and that the topic of the conference was—he.

From behind and below the howling came again. The cats pricked up their ears. There were more movements, more glances in his direction. Then as he began jogging along again, one of the cats—the tiger—leaped down and streaked away past him, downhill. While the black-and-gray and the black dropped off the granite rim more leisurely and began to trot along in the direction he was taking, with frequent sidewise glances.

He quickened his pace, grateful for the reserve energy.

The going was good. There were no eroded chutes to be edged around, no pines to fight.

Once the howling was repeated faintly.

The shadowy bodies of the cats slipped between the boulders, in and out. Gradually he began to draw ahead of them.

For some reason everything felt very natural, as if he had been created for this running through the dusk.

He sprinted up the last stretch, came out on top.

For a long time he just looked and turned, and turned and looked. Everything else—emotions, thought—was subordinated to the act of seeing.

Up here it was still pretty light. And there were no hills to shut out the view. It stretched, snow-streaked, lightless, lifeless, achingly drear, to black horizons in three directions and a distant glittering icewall in the fourth.

The only suggestion of habitation was a thin pencil of smoke rising some distance across the plateau he faced.

For as long as he could, he pretended not to recognize the ruins sparsely dotting the landscape—vast mountainous stumps of structures, buckled and tortured things, blackened and ice-streaked, surrounded by strange formations of rock that suggested lava ridges, as if the very ground had melted and churned and boiled when those ruins were made.

A ruined world, from which the last rays of a setting sun, piercing for a moment the smoky ruins, struck dismal yellow highlights.

But recognition could only be held at bay for a few minutes. His guess about the ravine had been correct. That snow-shrouded, mile-long mound ahead of him was the grave of the Opal Cross. That dark monolith far to the left was the stump of the Gray H. Those two lopped towers, crazily buckled and leaning toward each other as if for support, were the Gray Twins. That split and jagged mass the other side of the ravine, black against the encroaching ice, upthrust like the hand of a buried man, was the Rusty T.

It could hardly be World I, no matter after what catastrophe or lapse of years. For there was no sign, not even a suggestive hump, of the Blue Lorraine, the Mauve Z, or the Myrtle Y. Nor World II, for the Black Star's ruins would have bulked monstrously on the immediate left.

He looked at his hands.

They were thickened and calloused, ridged and darkened by scars of wounds and frostbite, the nails grained and uneven. And yet they were Thorn's hands.

He lifted them and touched his chapped, scaly face, with its high-growing, uncombed beard and long hair matted against his neck under the fur hood.

His clothes were a miscellany of stiff, inexpertly tanned furs, portions of a worn and dirty suit of flying togs, and improvised bits of stuff, such as the hacked-out sections of elastoid flooring constituting the soles of his boots.

His heavy belt, which was reinforced with reading tape, supported two pouches, besides the knife, which seemed to be a crudely hilted cutter from a hyperlathe.

One of the pouches contained a slingshot powered by strips of elastoid, several large pebbles, and three dark, dubious chunks of meat.

In the other were two small containers of nutriment-concentrate with packaging-insignia of twenty-five years ago, a stimulol canister with one pellet left, two bits of sharp metal, a jagged fragment of flint, three more pieces of elastoid, more reading tape, a cord made of sinew, a glastic lens, a wood carver's handsaw, a small, dismantled heat-projector showing signs of much readaptive tinkering, several unidentifiable objects, and—the smooth gray sphere he had stolen at the Yggdrasil.

Even as he was telling himself it could not be the same one, his blunt fingers were recognizing its unforgettable smoothness, its oblate form, its queerly exaggerated inertia. His mind was remembering he had fancied it a single supergiant molecule, a key—if one knew how to use it—to the doors of unseen worlds.

But there was only time to guess that the thing must be linked to his mind rather than to any of the bodies his mind had occupied, and to wonder how it had escaped the thorough search to which he had been subjected in the Black Star, when his attention was diverted by a faint eager yapping that burst out suddenly and was as suddenly choked off.

He turned around. Up the boulder-studded slope he had just ascended, streaming out of the underbrush at its base, came a pack of wolves, or dogs—at least thirty of them. They took the same sloping course that he had taken. There was a strange suggestion of discipline

about their silent running. He could not be sure—the light was very bad—but he fancied he saw smaller furry shapes clinging to the backs of one or two of them.

He knew now why he had spent time admiring a fire.

But the pack was between him and that fire, so he turned and ran across the plateau toward where he had glimpsed the rising wisp of smoke.

As he ran he broke out and chewed the lone stimulol pellet, breathing thanks to that Thorn—he would call him Thorn III—who had hoarded the pellet for so many years, against some ultimate emergency.

He ran well. His clumsily booted feet avoided rocks and ruts, hit firmly on icy patches, with a sureness that made him wonder if they did not know the route. And when the stimulol hit his blood-stream, he was able to increase speed slightly. But risking a look back, he saw the pack pouring up over the crest. A steady baying began, eager, and mournful.

In the growing darkness ahead a low, ruddy, winking light showed. He studied its slow increase in size, intent on gauging the exact moment when he would dare to sprint.

The way became rougher. It was a marvel how his feet carried him. The ruddy light became a patch, illumining a semicircular opening behind it. The baying drew near. He could hear the scuff of clawed feet. He started to sprint.

And just in time. There was a great brown hound springing higher than his shoulder, snapping in at his neck, splashing it with slaver, as he jumped the fire, turned with his whipped-out knife, and took his stand beside the gnarled man with the spear, in front of the doorless doorway of the half-buried room, or large crate, of weathered plastoid.

Then for a moment it was chaotic battle—gaunt-bellied forms rearing above the flames—red eyes and clashing yellow fangs—spear and cutter licking out—reek of singed hair—snarls, squeals, grunts, gasps—and, dominating it all, making it hellish, those three spitting, mewing cat-faces peering over the shoulders of three dogs that hung in the rear.

Then, as if at a note of command, the dogs all retreated and it was suddenly over. Without a word, Thorn and the other man began to repair and restock with fuel the scattered fire. When it was finished, the other man asked, "Did they get you anywhere? I may be crazy,

but I think the devils are starting to poison the teeth of some of the hounds."

Thorn said, "I don't think so," and began to examine his hands and arms.

The other man nodded. "What food you got?" he asked suddenly.

Thorn told him. The other man seemed impressed by the nutriment-concentrate. He said, "We could hunt together for a while, I guess. Ought to work out good—having one watching while the other sleeps." He spoke rapidly, jumbling the words together. His voice sounded disused. He studied Thorn uneasily.

Thorn studied him. He was smaller and moved with a limp, but beard, skin, and clothing were like Thorn's. The screwed-up face was not familiar. The darting, red-rimmed eyes below the jutting brows were not altogether sane. Thorn's presence seemed to put him on edge, to shake his emotions to the core. Every time he snapped shut his cracked, nervous lips, Thorn felt that he dammed up a torrent of babblingly eager talk.

He asked Thorn, "Where did you come from?"

"A cave in the ravine," Thorn replied, wondering how much to tell. "What's your story?"

The man looked at him queerly. He trembled. Then the cracked lips opened.

To Thorn, squatting there behind the crackling fence of flame, staring out into a night that was black except for the occasional red hint of eyes, it seemed that what he heard was what he had always known.

"My name was Darkington. I was a geology student. What saved me was that I was in the mountains when the power broke loose. I guess we all knew about the power, didn't we? It was in the air. We'd always known that some day someone would find out what it was behind gravity and electricity and magnetism"—he stumbled over the long words—"and the more they tried to hush it up, the surer we were that someone had found out. I guess they shouldn't have tried to hush it up. I guess intelligent creatures can't back out of their destiny like that.

"But anyway I was in the muntains when the power broke loose and ate up all the metal it could reach. Our party was laid up by the fumes, and two of them died. Afterwards some of us started out to try to contact other survivors, but the fumes were worse where we

went and some more died and the rest broke up. I got in with a gang that was trying to make a go of farming just north of the volcano belt, but we made a lot of mistakes and then came the first of the long winters and finished off all our plans and made us realize that the weather had all gone different, what with the exposed raw rock taking all the carbon dioxide out of the air, and not enough green stuff left to replace it. After that I drifted around and took up with different scavenging gangs, but when the cannibalism started and the cats and dogs began to get really dangerous, I headed north and made it to the glaciers. Since then I've just hung on, like you see me."

He turned to Thorn. Already his voice was hoarse. Like nervous hunger, his eagerness to talk had not carried him far.

Thorn shook his head, peering beyond the fire. "There must be a way," he said slowly. "Admittedly it would be difficult and we'd risk our lives, but still there must be a way."

"A way?" the other asked blankly.

"Yes, back to wherever men are beginning to band together and rebuild. South, I suppose. We might have to hunt for a long time, but we'd find it."

There was a long silence. A curious look of sympathy came into the other man's face.

"You've got the dreams," he told Thorn, making his croaking voice gentle. "I get them myself, so strong that I can make myself believe for a while that everything's the way it was. But it's just the dreams. Nobody's banding together. Nobody's going to rebuild civilization, unless"—his hand indicated something beyond the fire—"unless it's those devils out there."

XI

He who lets fortunetellers shape his decisions, follows a chartless course.
Artemidorus of Cilicia.

Alternate waves of guilt and almost unbearable excitement washed Clawly I as he hurried through the deserted corridors of the Blue Lorraine toward the office of Oktav. In grimmest seriousness he wondered whether his own fancied role of mad Pied Piper had not come true, whether his mind—and those of Firemoor and his other accomplices in the Martian hoax—were not already more than half usurped by

diabolically mischievous mentalities whose only purpose, or pleasure, was to see a sane world reduced to chaos.

For the faked threat of a Martian invasion was producing all the effects he could ever have anticipated, and more, as the scenes he had just been witnessing proved. They stuck in his mind, those scenes. The air around the Blue Lorraine aswarm with fliers from bullet-swift couriers to meddlesome schoolchildren. Streams of machine-units and various materials and supplies going out on subtronic currents for distribution to selected points in the surrounding countryside, for it had early become apparent that the skylons were exceedingly vulnerable to attack from space—all Earth's eggs in a few thousand baskets. Engineers busy around the Blue Lorraine's frosty summit, setting up energy-projectors and other improvised subtronic artillery—for although the skylons were vulnerable, they were the proud symbols and beloved homes of civilization and would be defended to the last. All eyes craned apprehensively upward as a thundering spaceship burst through the blue sky, then lowered in ruefully humorous relief as it became obvious that it was, of course, no alien invader, but one of Earth's own ships headed for the nearby yards to be fitted with subtronic weapons. All eyes turned momentarily to the west, where defensive screens were being tried out, to watch a vast iridescent dome leap momentarily into being and a circle of woodland puff into smoke. Excited eyes, all of them, as ready to flash with humor as to betray shock, anxiety, or fear. Eyes that were seven-eighths "There probably won't be any invasion" and one-eighth "There will be." Eyes that made Clawly proud of mankind, but that also awakened sickening doubts as to the wisdom of his trickery.

And to think that this sort of thing was going on all over the world. The use of subtronic power in transport and fabrication made possible a swiftness in preparation never before known in Earth's history. Organization was a weak point, the Earth being geared for the leisurely existence of peace and individual freedom, but various local agencies were taking over while the World Executive Committee created the framework of a centralized military authority. Confusedly perhaps, and a little bunglingly, but eagerly, wholeheartedly, and above all swiftly, Earth was arming to meet the threat.

It was all so much *bigger* than anyone could have anticipated, Clawly told himself for the hundredth time, unconsciously increasing his

already rapid pace as he neared Oktav's office. He had started it all, but now it was out of his hands. He could only wait and hope that, when the real invasion came, across time rather than space, the present preparations would prove useful to Earth's bewildered defenders. In any case, a few hours would tell the story, for this was the third day.

But what if the transtime invasion did not come in three days? The hoax might be uncovered at any moment now—Firemoor was already regretting the whole business, on the verge of a funk—and during the period of angry reaction no invasion reports of any sort would be believed. Then he would be in the position of having cried wolf to the world.

Or what if the transtime invasion did not come at all? All his actions had been based on such insubstantial evidence—Thorn's dream-studies, certain suggestive psychological aberrations, the drugged Conjerly's murmur of ". . . invasion . . . three days . . ." He was becoming increasingly convinced that he would soon wake, as if from a nightmare, and find himself accused as a madman or charlatan.

Certainly his nerves were getting out of hand. He needed Thorn. Never before had he realized the degree to which he and Thorn were each other's balance wheel. But Thorn was still missing, and the inquiry agencies had no progress to report. Despite the larger anxieties in which his mind was engulfed, Thorn's absence preyed upon it to such a degree that he had twice fancied he spotted Thorn among the swirling crowd outside the Blue Lorraine.

But even more than he needed Thorn, he needed Oktav. Now that the crisis had come, he could see to what an extent the seer's advice had determined all his actions, from his first serious belief in the possibility of transtime invasion to his engineering of the Martian hoax. Call it superstition, ignorant credulity, hypnotism, the fact remained that he believed in Oktav, was convinced that Oktav had access to fields of knowledge undreamed of by ordinary men. And now that Oktav was gone, he felt an increasing helplessness and desperation, so that he could not resist the impulse driving him back once more to the cryptically empty office.

As he raised his hand to activate the door, memories came stealing eerily back—of former sessions in the room beyond, of the last session, of Oktav's strange summoner clad in the garments of Dawn Civiliza-

tion, of the inexplicable disappearance of summoner and summoned in the exitless inner chamber.

But before his hand could activate the door, it opened.

Clad in his customary black robe, Oktav was sitting at his desk.

As if into a dream within a dream, Clawly entered.

Although the seer had always seemed supernaturally ancient, Clawly's first impression was that Oktav had vastly aged in the past three days. Something had happened to drain his small remaining store of life forces almost to the last drop. The hands were folded white claws. The face was wrinkle-puckered skin drawn tight over a fragile skull. But in the sunken, droopingly lidded eyes, knowledge burned more fiercely than ever. And not knowledge alone, but also something new —a reckless determination to use that knowledge. It was a look that made Clawly shiver—and thrill.

All the questions that had pounded at his brain so long, waiting for this interview, were suddenly mute.

"I have been on a far journey," said the seer. "I have visited many worlds that were supposed to be dead, and have seen what strange horrors can result when mere men seek to make wise use of a power befitting only a god or creatures like gods. I have gone in constant danger, for there are those against whom I have rebelled and who therefore seek my life, but I am safe from them for a time. Sit down, and I will tell you what is in my mind."

Clawly complied. Oktav leaned forward, tapping the desk with one bone-thin finger.

He continued, "For a long time I have spoken to you in riddles, dealt with you vaguely, because I was trying to play a double game—impart essential information to you, and yet not impart it. That time is past. From now on I speak clearly. In a little while I shall depart on a desperate venture. If it succeeds, I do not think you will have to fear the invasion threatening your world. But it may fail, and therefore I must first put at your disposal all the information I possess, so that you can judge how best to act in that event."

He looked up quickly. Clawly heard movement in the corridor. But it was from the inner chamber that the sudden interruption came.

Once again Oktav's summoner stood in the inner doorway. Once again that young-old, ignorant-wise, animal-god face was turned on Oktav. The muscles of the clamped jaw stood out like knobs. One arm

in its cylinderlike sleeve of stiff, ancient fabric, was rigidly extended toward the seer.

But Clawly had only time for the barest glance, and Oktav had even less—he was just starting to turn and his eyes were only on the verge of being lighted with a flicker of recognition—when a great tongue of softly bluish flame licked out from the summoner's hand and, not dying as flames should, folded around Oktav like a shroud.

Before Clawly's eyes, Oktav's robe burst into flame. His body shriveled, blackened, contorted in agony, curling like a leaf. Then it was still.

The soft flame returned to the summoner's hand.

Incapable of motion or connected thought or any feeling but a sick dismay, Clawly watched. The summoner walked over to Oktav's desk —clumsily, as if he were not used to dealing with three-dimensional worlds, but also contemptuously, as if worlds of three or any other number of dimensions were very trivial affairs to him. He extracted from the charred remains of Oktav's robe a small gray sphere, which Clawly now saw was similar to one which the summoner had been holding in his outstretched hand. Then, with an equal clumsiness and contempt, with a sweeping glance that saw Clawly and ignored him, the summoner walked back through the inner doorway.

Clawly's body felt like a sack of water. He could not take his eyes off the thing behind the desk. It looked more like a burnt mummy than a burnt man. By some chance the blue flame had spared the high forehead, giving the face a grotesquely splotched appearance.

The outer door was opened, but Clawly did not turn or otherwise move. He heard a hissing inhalation—presumably when the newcomer saw the hideous corpse—but the newcomer had to come round in front before Clawly saw and recognized—or rather, partly recognized —him. And even then Clawly felt no reaction of astonishment or relief, or any reaction he might have expected to feel. The incredible scene he had just witnessed lingered like an after-image, and other thoughts and feelings refused to come into focus. The dead body of Oktav dominated his vision and his mind, as if emanating a palpable aura that blurred everything else.

The newcomer noted the incompleteness of Clawly's recognition, for he said, "Yes, I'm Thorn, but, I think you know, not the Thorn who was your friend, although I am inhabiting his body." To Clawly

the words seemed to come from a great distance; he had to fight an insidious lethargy to hear them at all. They continued, "That Thorn is taking my place in the world—and three days ago I rejoiced to think of the suffering he would undergo there. Fact is, I was your enemy—his and yours—but now I'm not so sure. I'm even beginning to think we may be able to help each other a great deal. But I'm responsible for more lives than just my own, so until I'm sure of you, I daren't take any chances. That's the reason for this."

And he indicated the small tubular object in his hand, which seemed to be the dismantled main propulsion unit of a suit of flying togs—a crude but effective short-range blaster.

Clawly began to take him in, though it was still hard for him to see anything but the thing behind the desk. Yes, it was Thorn's face, all right, but with a very uncharacteristic expression of stubborn and practical determination.

The newcomer continued, "I've been following you because Thorn's memoranda tapes showed that you and he were working together in what seemed to be an effort to warn this world of its danger. But lately things have been happening that make me doubt that—things I want explained. What's this Martian invasion? Is it real? Or an attempt to rouse your world into a state of preparedness? Or a piece of misdirection designed to confuse the issue and make the Servant's invasion easier? Then, why did you come here, and who is this creature, and how did he die?" With a gesture of repugnance, he indicated the body of Oktav. "What I overheard reawakened my old suspicion that there's somebody behind this business of duplicate worlds, somebody who's making a profit from it, somebody—"

His voice went dead. In an instant, all the frowning concentration blanked out of his face. Very slowly, like a man who suddenly becomes aware that there is a monster behind him, he began to turn around.

At the same time, Clawly felt himself begin to shake—and for the same reason.

It was a very small and ordinary thing—just a small cough, a dry clearing of the throat. But it came from behind the desk.

The shriveled, scorched body was swaying a little; the charred hands were pushing across the desk, leaving black smears; a tremor was apparent in the blackened jaw.

For a moment they only watched in horror. Then, drawn by the same irresistible impulse, they slowly approached the desk.

The blind, ghastly movements continued. Then the burnt lips parted, and they heard the whisper—a whisper that was in every syllable a hard-won victory over seared tissues.

"I should be dead, but strange vitalities linger in him who has possessed a talisman. My eyes are embers, but I an dimly see you. Come closer, that I may say what must be said. I have a testament to make, and little time in which to make it, and no choice as to whom it is made. Draw nearer, that I may tell you what must be done for the sake of all worlds."

They obeyed, sweat starting from their foreheads in awe of the inhumanly sustained vitality that permitted this charred mummy to speak.

"Purely by chance, a man of the Dawn Civilization discovered a talisman—a small nonmechanical engine controlled by thought—giving him the power of traveling in time, and across time, and into the regions beyond time. There it led him to seven other talismans, and to a similar but larger engine of even greater power, which he named the Probability Engine. He took in with him seven accomplices, I being one, and together we used the Probability Engine to split time and make actual all possible worlds, preserving only the best of them, and —so we thought—destroying the rest."

The whisper slowly began to diminish in strength. Clawly and the other leaned in closer to the black, white-foreheaded face.

"But I discovered that those destroyed worlds still exist, and I know too well what mad tinkering the others will be prompted to, when they make the same discovery. You must prevent them, as I intended to. In particular, you must find the Probability Engine and summon its true owners, whatever creatures they may be, who built it and who lost the first talisman. They're the only ones fitted to deal with the tangle of problems we have created. But to find the Probability Engine, you must have a talisman. Ters, who destroyed me, took mine, but that was one which I had stolen. My own original talisman is in the position of Thorn, the Thorn of this world, who stole it from me, I now believe, because of some unconscious prompting from the True Owners, groping through many-layered reality in an effort to find their

lost engine. That Thorn is worlds away from here, more worlds than you suspect. But you"—his fingers fumbled sideways, touching those of the other Thorn, who did not withdraw his hand— "can get into touch . . . with him . . . through your linked . . . subconscious minds." The whisper was barely audible. It was obvious that even the talisman-vitalized strength was drawing to an end. "That talisman . . . which he has . . . is inert. It takes a key-thought . . . to unlock its powers. You must transmit . . . the key-thought . . . to him. The key-thought . . . is . . . 'Three botched . . . worlds—' "

The whisper trailed off into a dry rattle, then silence. The jaw fell open. The head slumped forward. Clawly caught it, palm to white forehead, and let it gently down on to the desk, where the groping fingers had traced a black, crisscross pattern.

Over it, Clawly's eyes, and those of the other Thorn, met.

XII

The coup d'état may appear in a thousand different guises. The prudent ruler suspects even his own shadow.

de Etienne.

The Sky Room of the Opal Cross was so altered it was hard to believe it had been a festivities center only three days ago. The World Map and Space Map still held their dominating positions, but the one was dotted with colored pictorial symbols indicating the location of spaceports and spaceyards, defense installations, armament fabrication and conversion centers, regular and emergency power stations, field headquarters, and like military information, while the Space Map, in which a system of perspective realistically conveyed three-dimensional depth, was similarly dotted in the Marsward sector to indicate the real or hypothetic location of spacecraft. This latter map emphasized with chilling clarity the fact that Earth had nothing at all in the way of an interplanetary battle fleet, only a scattering of unarmed or lightly armed exploratory craft that now, by stretching a point, could be counted as scouts. While fanning out from Mars in a great hemisphere, hypothetic but none the less impressive, loomed a vast armada.

The rest of the Sky Room was filled with terraced banks of televisor panels, transmission boards, plotting tables, and various calculating machines, all visible from the central control table around which they

crowded. One whole sector was devoted to other military installations and specialized headquarters in the Opal Cross. Other sectors linked the control table with field headquarters, observation centers, spacecraft, and so on.

But now all the boards and tables, save the central one, were unoccupied. The calculating machines were untended and inoperative. And the massed rows of televisor panels were all blank gray—as pointless as a museum with empty cases.

A similar effect of bewildered deflation was apparent in most of the faces of the World Executive Committee around the control table. The exceptions included Chairman Shielding, who looked very angry, though it was a grave anger and well under control; Conjerly and Tempelmar, completely and utterly impassive; Clawly, also impassive, but with the suggestion that it would only take a hairtrigger touch to release swift speech or action; and Firemoor, who, sitting beside Clawly, was plainly ill at ease—pale, nervous, and sweating.

Shielding, on his feet, was explaining why the Sky Room had been cleared of its myriad operators and clerks. His voice was as cuttingly realistic as a spray of ice water.

". . . and then," he continued, "when astronomic photographs incontrovertibly proved that there were no alien craft of any sort near Mars—certainly none of the size reported and nothing remotely resembling a fleet, not even any faintly suspicious asteroids or cometary bodies—I hesitated no longer. On my own responsibility I sent out orders countermanding any and all defense preparations. That was half an hour ago."

One of the gray panels high in the Opal Cross sector came to life. As if through a window, a young man with a square face and crisply cropped blond hair peered out. The emptiness of the Sky Room seemed to startle him. He looked around for a moment, then switched to high amplification and called down to Shielding:

"Physical Research Headquarters reporting. A slight variation in spatio-temporal constants has been noted in this immediate locality. The variation is of a highly technical nature, but the influence of unknown spy-beams or range-finding emanations is a possible, though unlikely, explanation."

Shielding called sharply, "Didn't you receive the order countermanding all activities?"

"Yes, but I thought—"

"Sorry," called Shielding, "but the order applies to Research Headquarters as much as any others."

"I see," said the young man and, with a vague nod, blanked out.

There was no particular reaction to this dialogue, except that the studied composure of Conjerly and Tempelmar became, if anything, more marked—almost complacent.

Shielding turned back. "We now come to the question of who engineered this criminally irresponsible hoax, which," he added somberly, "has already cost the lives of more than a hundred individuals, victims of defense-preparation accidents." Firemoor winced and went a shade paler. "Unquestionably a number of persons must have been in on it, mainly members of the Extraterrestrial Service. It couldn't have been done otherwise. But we are more interested in the identity of the main instigators. I am sorry to say that there can be no question as to the identity of at least two of these. The confession of three of the accomplices make it—"

"Co-ordination Center 3 reporting." Another of the Opal Cross panels had flashed on and its perplexed occupant, like the other, was using high amplification to call his message down to Shielding. "Local Power Station 4 has just cut me off, in the midst of a message describing an inexplicable drain on their power supply. Also, the presence of an unknown vehicle has been reported from the main rotunda."

"We are not receiving reports," Shielding shouted back. "Please consult your immediate superior for instructions."

"Right," the other replied sharply, immediately switching off.

"There you see, gentlemen," Shielding commented bitterly, "just how difficult it is to halt a hoax of this sort. In spite of all our efforts, there undoubtedly will be more tragic accidents before minds get back to normal." He paused, turned. "Clawly and Firemoor, what do you have to say for yourselves in justification of your actions, beyond a confession of wanton mischievousness, or—I must mention this possibility too—an attempt to create confusion for the furtherance of some treasonable plot? Remember it is not a matter of accomplices' confessions alone, who might conceivably perpetrate a hoax and then attempt to shift the blame onto blindly gullible and negligent superiors. There is also the testimony of two members of our own committee, who can for the moment remain anonymous—"

"I see no reason for that," drawled Tempelmar.

"Thank you." Shielding nodded to him. "Very well, then. The testimony of Conjerly and Tempelmar." And he turned again toward the accused.

Firemoor looked down at the table and twisted miserably. Clawly returned Shielding's gaze squarely. But before either of them could reply—

"Co-ordination Center 4! Reporting the presence of a group of armed individuals in black garments of an unfamiliar pattern proceeding—"

"Please do not bother us!" Shielding shouted irritably. "Consult your superior! Tell him to refer all communications to Co-ordination Center I!"

This time the offending panel blanked out without reply.

Shielding turned to a master control board behind him and rapidly flipped off all the beams, insuring against future interruption.

Clawly stood up. His face had the frozenness of pent tension, an odd mixture of grim seriousness and mocking exasperation at men's blindness, suggestive of a gargoyle.

"It was a hoax," he said coolly, "and I alone planned it. But it was a hoax that was absolutely necessary to prepare the world for that other invasion, against which I tried to warn you three days ago. The invasion whose vanguard is already in our midst. Of course Conjerly and Tempelmar testified against me—for they are part of the vanguard!"

"You're psychotic," said Shielding flatly, lowering his head a little, like a bull. "Paranoid. The only wonder is how it escaped the psychiatrists. Watch him, some of you"—he indicated those nearest Clawly—"while I call the attendants."

"Stay where you are, all of you! And you, Shielding, don't flip that beam!" Clawly had danced back a step, and a metal tube gleamed in his hand. "Since you believe I planned the Martian hoax—and I did—perhaps you'll believe that I won't stop at a few more deaths, not accidental this time, in order to make you see the truth. Idiots! Can't you see what's happening under your very noses? Don't you see what those reports may have meant? Call Co-ordination Center I, Shielding. Go on, I mean it, call them!"

But at that instant Firemoor spun round in his chair and dove at Clawly, pinioning his arms, hurling them both down, wrenching the

metal tube from his hand, sending it spinning to one side. A moment later he had dragged Clawly to his feet, still holding him pinioned.

"I'm sorry," he gasped miserably. "But I had to do it for your own sake. We were wrong—wrong to the point of being crazy. And now we've got to admit it. Looking back, I can't see how I ever—"

But Clawly did not even look at him. He stared grimly at Shielding.

"Thank you, Firemoor," said Shielding, a certain relief apparent in his voice. "You still have a great deal to answer for. That can't be minimized—but this last action of yours will certainly count in your favor."

This information did not seem to make Firemoor particularly happy. The pinioned Clawly continued to ignore him and to stare at Shielding.

"Call Communications Center I," he said, deliberately.

Shielding dismissed the interruption with a glance. He sat down.

"The attendants will remove him shortly. Well, gentlemen," he said, "it's time we considered how best to repair the general dislocations caused by this panic. Also there's the matter of our position with regard to the trial of the accomplices." There was a general pulling-in of chairs.

"Call Communications Center I," Clawly repeated.

Shielding did not even look up.

But someone else said, "Yes. I think now you'd better call them."

Shielding had started automatically to comply, before he realized just who it was that was speaking—and the particular tone that was being used.

It was Conjerly and the tone was one of command.

Conjerly and Tempelmar had risen, and were standing there as solidly as two obelisks—and indeed there was something unpleasantly monumental in their intensified, self-satisfied composure. Before anyone realized it, the center of attention of the meeting had shifted from Clawly and Firemoor to these new figures—or rather to these old and familiar figures suddenly seen in a new and formidable guise.

Shielding blinked at them a moment, as if he didn't know who they were. Then, with a haste that was almost that of fear, he swung around and flipped a beam on the board behind him.

Halfway up the terraced banks of gray squares, a panel came to life.

A man in black uniform looked down from it.

"Communications Center I seized for the Servants," he announced crisply in a queerly accented though perfectly intelligible voice.

Shielding stood stock-still for a moment, then flipped another beam.

"The soldiers of the Servants are in control at this point," said the second black-uniformed individual, speaking with equal crispness.

With a stifled, incredulous gasp, Shielding ran his hand down the board, flipping on all the panels in the Opal Cross sector.

Most of them showed black-uniformed figures. Of the remainder, the majority were empty.

And then it became apparent that not all the black-uniformed figures were merely televised images. Some of them were standing between the panels, in the Sky Room itself, holding weapons trained.

By a psychological illusion, the figures of Conjerly and Tempelmar seemed to grow taller.

"Yes," Conjerly said, soberly, almost kindly, "your government—or, rather, that absence of all sane control which you call a government—is now in the capable hands of the Servants of the People. Clawly's assertions were all quite correct, though fortunately we were able to keep you from believing them—a necessary deception. There *is* an invasion going on—an invasion that is in the best interests of all worlds, and one from which yours will benefit greatly. It is being made across time, through a region that has become common to both our worlds. That region is our transtime bridgehead. And, as is plain to see, our bridgehead coincides with your headquarters."

Clawly was not listening. He was watching a figure that was striding down the paneled terraces, its smilingly curious eyes fixed upon him. And as he watched, Firemoor and Shielding and some others began to watch too, slack-faced, dully amazed at this secondary impossibility.

The approaching figure was clad in black military flying togs whose sleek cut and suavely gleaming texture marked them as those of an individual of rank. But so far as physique and appearance were concerned, down to the last detail of facial structure, including even a similarity of expression—a certain latent sardonic mockery—he was Clawly's duplicate.

There was something very distinctive about the way the two eyed each other. No one could have said just when it started, but by the

time they were facing each other across the control table, it was very plain; the look of two men come to fight a duel.

Clawly's face hardened. His gaze seemed to concentrate. His dupliate started, as if at a slight unexpected blow. For an instant he grinned unpleasantly, then his face grew likewise grim.

Neither moved. There was only that intense staring, accompanied by a silent straining of muscles and a breathing that grew heavy. But none of those who watched doubted but that an intangible duel was being fought.

Conjerly, frowning, stepped forward. But just then there grew a look of sudden desperate terror in the contorted face of Clawly's black-clad duplicate. He staggered back a step, as if to avoid falling into a pit. An unintelligible cry was wrenched out of him, and he snatched at his holster.

But even as he raised the weapon, there flashed across the first Clawly's features a triumphant, oddly *departing* smile.

XIII

Yggdrasil shakes, and shiver on high
The ancient limbs, and the giant is loose;
Elder Edda.

In the black, cramping tunnel Thorn could only swing his knife in a narrow arc, and the snarl of the attacking dog was concentrated into a grating roar that hurt his eardrums. Nevertheless, knife took effect before fangs, and with an angry whimper the dog backed away—there was no room to turn.

From the receding scuffle of its claws Thorn could tell that it had retreated almost to the beginning of the tunnel. He relaxed from the crouch that had put his back against the rocky roof, sprawled in a position calculated to rest elbows and knees, and considered his situation.

Of course, as he could see now, it had been an inexcusable blunder to enter the tunnel without first building a fire to insure his being able to get back to a place from which he could use his slingshot. But coming down the ravine he hadn't seen a sign of the devils, and there was no denying it had been necessary to revisit the cave to see if Thorn III had any extra food, weapons, or clothing stored there. The need for food

was imperative, and yesterday he and Darkington had completely failed in their hunting.

He wondered if Darkington would attempt a rescue. Hardly, since it would be late afternoon before the gnarled little man returned from his own hunting circuit. With night coming on, it was unlikely that he would risk his life venturing down into the ravine for the sake of a man whom he believed to be half-crazy. For Thorn had tried to tell him altogether too much about alternate worlds in which Civilization had not perished. Darkington had dismissed all this as "the dreams," and Thorn had shut up, but not until he realized he was forfeiting all Darkington's confidence in him as a hard-bitten and realistic neosavage.

Besides, Darkington was a little crazy himself. Long years of solitary living had developed fixed habit patterns. His hunger for comradeship had become largely a subjective fantasy, and the unexpected appearance of an actual comrade seemed to make him uncomfortable and uneasy rather than anything else, since it demanded readaptation. A man marooned in a wilderness and trying to get back to civilization is one thing. But a man who knows that civilization is dead and that before him stretch only dark savage eons in which other creatures will have the center of the stage, is quite a different animal.

Something was digging into Thorn's side. Twisting his left hand back at an uncomfortable angle—his right still held the knife or cutter—he worked the pouch from under him and took out the offending article. It was the puzzling sphere that had stayed with him during all his passages between the worlds. Irritably he tossed it away. He had wasted enough time trying to figure out the significance or purpose of the thing. It was as useless as . . . as that graveyard of skylons up there.

He heard it bound up the tunnel, roll back a way, come to rest.

Evidently his captors heard it too, for there came a sharp mewing and growling, which did not break off sharply, but sank into a confused palaver of similar sounds, strongly suggestive of some kind of speech. Once or twice he thought he recognized human words, oddly telescoped and slurred to fit feline and canine palates. It was not pleasant to be cramped up in a tunnel and wondering what cats and dogs were saying about you in a half-borrowed, quasi-intelligent jargon.

And then, very softly, Thorn thought he heard someone calling his name.

His almost immediate reaction was a sardonic grimace at the vast number of unlikely sounds a miserable man will twist into a resemblance of his name. But gradually the fancied sound began to exert a subtle pull on his thoughts, dragging them away toward speculations which his present predicament did not justify.

But who is to say what thoughts a trapped and doomed man shall think? As Thorn told himself with some calmness, this was probably his last stretch of reflective thinking. Of course, when death came sufficiently close, the fear of it might enable him to escape into another body. But that was by no means certain or even probable. He reflected that every exchange he had made had been into a worse world. And now, presumably, he was at the bottom, and like energy that has reached the nadir of its cycle of degradation, unable to rise except with outside help.

Besides, he did not like the idea of dooming any other Thorn to this predicament, although he was afraid he would do it if given the chance.

Again he dreamily fancied he heard his name called.

He wondered what was happening to those other Thorns, in their hodgepodged destinies. Thorn III in World II—had he died in the instant of his arrival there, or had the Servants noted the personality-change in time and perhaps spared him? Thorn II in World I. Thorn I in World III. It was like some crazy game—some game devised by a mad, cruel god.

And yet what was the whole universe, so far as it had been revealed to him, but a mad, cruel pageantry? The Dawn myth was right—there were serpents gnawing at every root of the cosmic ash Yggdrasil. In three days he had seen three worlds, and none of them were good. World III, wrecked by subtronic power, cold battlefield for a hopeless last stand. World II, warped by paternalistic tyranny, smoldering with hate and boredom. World I, a utopia in appearance, but lacking real stamina or inward worth, not better than the others—only luckier.

Three botched worlds.

He started. It was as if, with that last thought, something altogether ouside his mind had attached itself to his mind in the most intimate way imaginable. He had the queerest feeling that his thoughts had gained power, that they were no longer locked-in and helpless except for their ability to control a puny lever-assembly of bones and contractile tissue, that they could reach out of his mind like tentacles and

move things, that they had direct control of a vastly more competent engine.

A faint sound up the tunnel recalled his altered mind to his present predicament. It might have been a tiny scrape of claws on rock. It was not repeated. He gripped his knife. Perhaps one of the beasts was attempting a surprise attack. If only there were some light—

A yellowish flame, the color of the woodfire he had been visualizing, flared up without warning a few feet ahead, casting shafts of ruddy glare and shadow along the irregular tunnel. It lit up the muzzles of a gaunt gray dog and a scarred black cat that had been creeping toward him, side by side. For an instant surprise froze them. Then the dog backed off frantically, with a yelp of panic. The cat snarled menacingly and stared wildly at the flame, as if desperately trying to figure out its *modus operandi.*

But, with Thorn's thought, the flame advanced and the cat gave ground before it. At first it only backed, continuing to snarl and stare. Then it turned tail, and answering in a great screech the questioning mews and growls that had been coming down the tunnel, fled as if from death.

The flame continued to advance, changing color when Thorn thought of daylight. And as Thorn edged and squirmed along, it seemed to him that somehow his way was made easier.

The tunnel heightened, widened. He emerged in the outer chamber in time to hear a reeding rattle of gravel.

The flame, white now, had come to rest in the middle of the rocky floor. Even as he stooped, it rose to meet him, winking out—and there rested lightly on his palm the gray sphere, cool and unsmirched, that he had tossed away a few minutes before.

But it was no longer a detached, external object. It was part of him, responsive to his every mood and thought, linked to his mind by tracts that were invisible but as real as the nerves connecting mind with muscle and sense organ. It was not a machine, telepathically controlled. It was a second body.

Relief, stark wonder, and exulting awareness of power made him weak. For a moment everything swam and darkened, but only for a moment—he seemed to suck limitless vitality from the thing.

He felt a surge of creativeness, so intense as to be painful, like a flame in the brain. He could do anything he wanted to, go anywhere

he wanted to, make anything he wanted to, create life, change the world, destroy it if he so willed—

And then—fear. Fear that, since the thing obeyed his thoughts, it would also obey his foolish, ignorant, or destructive ones. People can't control their thoughts for very long. Even sane individuals often think of murder, of catastrophes, of suicide—

Suddenly the sphere had become a gray globe of menace.

And then—after all, he couldn't do *anything*. Besides any other limitations the thing might have, it was certainly limited by his thoughts. It couldn't do things he didn't really understand—like building a subtronic engine—

Or—

For the first time since he had emerged from the tunnel, he tried to think collectedly, with more than the surface of his mind.

He found that the depths of his mind were strangely altered. His subconscious was no longer an opaque and impenetrable screen. He could see through it, as through a shadowy corridor, sink into it, hear the thoughts on the other side, the thoughts of the other Thorns.

One of them, he realized, was instructing him, laying a duty upon him.

The message dealt with such matters as to make the imagination shiver. It seemed to engulf his personality, his consciousness.

His last glimpse of World III was a gray one of dark, snow-streaked pines wavering in a rocky frame. Then that had clouded over, vanished, and he was in a limitless blackness where none of the senses worked and where only thought—itself become a sense—had power.

It was an utterly alien darkness without real up or down, or this way or that, or any normal spatial properties. It seemed that every point was adjacent to every other point, and so infinity was everywhere, and all paths led everywhere, and only thought could impose order or differentiate. And the darkness was not that of lightlessness, but of thought itself—fluttering with ghostly visions, aflash with insight.

And then, without surprise or any consciousness of alteration, he realized that he was no longer one Thorn, but three. A Thorn who had lived three lives—and whether memory pictured them as having been lived simultaneously or in sequence seemed to matter not at all. A Thorn who had learned patience and endurance and self-sufficiency

from harsh World III, who had had ground into the bedrock of his mind the knowledge that man is an animal in competition with other animals, that all human aspirations are but small and vaunting and doomed things—but not necessarily worthless therefore—in a blind and unfeeling cosmos, and that even death and the extinguishing of all racial hopes are ills that can be smiled at while you struggle against them. A Thorn who had seen and experienced in World II the worst of man's cruelty to man, who had gained a terrible familiarity with human nature's weaknesses, its cowardly submissiveness to social pressure, its capacity for self-delusion, its selfishness, its horrible adaptability, who had plumbed to their seething, poisoning depths the emotions of hate and resentment and envy and fear, but who in part had risen superior to all this and learned humility, and sympathy, and sacrifice, and devotion to a cause. A Thorn who, in too-easy World I, had learned how to use the dangerous gift of freedom, how to fight human nature's tendency to go evil and foul itself when it is not being disciplined by hardship and adversity, how to endure happiness and success without souring, how to create goals and purposes in an environment that does not supply them ready-made.

All these experiences were now those of one mind. They did not contradict or clash with each other. Between them there was no friction or envy or guilt. Each contributed a fund of understanding, carrying equal weight in the making of future decisions. And yet there was no sense of three minds bargaining together or talking together or even thinking together. There was only one Thorn, who, except for that period of childhood before the split took place, had lived three lives.

This composite Thorn, sustained by the talisman, poised in the dimensionless dark beyond space and time, felt that his personality had suddenly been immeasurably enriched and deepened, that hertofore he had been going around two-thirds blind and only now begun to appreciate the many-sidedness of life and the real significance of all that he had experienced.

And without hesitation or inward argument, without any sense of responding to the urgings of Thorn II, since there was no longer a separate Thorn II, he remembered what the death-resisting Oktav had whispered to him in the Blue Lorraine, syllable by agonized syllable, and he recalled the duty laid upon him by the seer.

He thought of the first step—the finding of the Probability Engine—and felt the answering surge of the talisman, and submitted to its guidance.

There was a dizzying sense of almost instantaneous passage over an infinite distance—and also a sense that there had been no movement at all, but only a becoming aware of something right at hand. And then—

The darkness pulsed and throbbed with power, a power that it seemed must rack to pieces many-branched time and shake down the worlds like rotten fruit. The thought-choked void quivered with a terrifying creativity, as if this were the growing-point of all reality.

Thorn became aware of seven minds crowded around the source of the pulsations and throbbing and quivering. Homely human minds like his own, but lacking even his own mind's tripled insight, narrower and more paternalistic than even the minds of World II's Servants of the People. Minds festooned with error, barnacled with bias, swollen with delusions of godhead. Minds altogether horrible in their power, and in their ignorance—which their power protected.

Then he became aware of vast pictures flaring up in the void in swift succession—visions shared by the seven minds and absorbing them to such a degree that they were unconscious of his presence.

Like river-borne wreckage after an eon-long jam has broken, the torrent of visions flowed past.

World II loomed up. First the drab Servants Hall, where eleven old men nodded in dour satisfaction as they assured themselves, by report and transtime televisor, that the invasion was proceeding on schedule. Then the picture broadened, to show great streams of subtronically mechanized soldiers and weapons moving in toward the transtime bridgehead of the Opal Cross. Individual faces flashed by—wry-lipped, uninterested, obedient, afraid.

For a moment World I was glimpsed—the interior of the Opal Cross shown in section like an anthill, aswarm with black uniforms. Quickly, as if the seven masters hated to look at their pet world so misused, this gave way to a panoramic vision of World III, in which hundreds of miles were swept over without showing anything but fallen or fire-tortured skylons, seared and scrub-grown wasteland, and—cheek by jowl—glacier walls and smoke-belching volcanoes.

But that was only the beginning. Fruits of earlier time-splits were shown. There was a world in which telepathic mutants fought with

jealous nontelepaths, who had found a way of screening their thoughts. There was a world in which a scarlet-robed hierarchy administered a science-powered religion that held millions in Dawn Age servitude. A world in which a tiny clique of hypnotic telepaths broadcast thoughts which all men believed in and lived by, doubtfully, as if in a half-dream. A world where civilization, still atomic-powered, was split into tiny feudalistic domains, forever at war, and the memory of law and brotherhood and research kept alive only in a few poor and unarmored monasteries. A world similarly powered and even more divided, in which each family or friends-group was an economically self-sustaining microcosm, and civilization consisted only of the social intercourse and knowledge-exchange of these microcosms. A world where men lived in idle parasitism on the labor of submen they had artificially created—and another world in which the relationship was reversed and the submen lived on men.

A world where two great nations, absorbing all the rest, carried on an endless bitter war, unable to defeat or be defeated, forever spurred to new efforts by the fear that past sacrifices might have been in vain. A world that was absorbed in the conquest of space, and where the discontented turned their eyes upward toward the new frontier. A world in which a great new religion gripped men's thoughts, and strange ceremonies were performed on hilltops and in spacecraft and converts laughed at hate and misery and fear, and unbelievers wonderingly shook their heads. A world in which there were no cities and little obvious machinery, and simply clad men led unostentatious lives. A sparsely populated world of small cities, whose inhabitants had the grave smiling look of those who make a new start. A world that was only a second asteroid belt—a scattering of exploded rocky fragments ringing the sun.

"We've seen enough!"

Thorn sensed the trapped horror and the torturing sense of unadmitted guilt in Prim's thought.

The visions flickered out, giving way to the blackness of unactualized thought. On this blackness Prim's next thought showed fiercely, grimly, monstrously. It was obvious that the interval had restored his power-bolstered egotism.

"Our mistake is evident but capable of correction. Our thoughts—or the thoughts of *some* of us—did not make it sufficiently clear to the

Probability Engine that absolute destruction rather than a mere veiling or blacking out, was intended, with regard to the botched worlds. There is no question as to our next step. Sekond?"

"Destroy! All of them, except the main trunk," instantly pulsed the answering thought.

"Ters?"

"Destroy!"

"Kart?"

"The invading world first. But all the others too. Swiftly!"

"Kant?"

"It might be well first to . . . No! Destroy!"

With a fresh surge of horror and revulsion, Thorn realized that these minds were absolutely incapable of the slightest approach to unbiased reasoning. They were so fanatically convinced of the correctness of all their past decisions as to the undesirability of the alternate worlds, that they were even completely blind to the apparent success of some of those worlds—or to the fact that the destruction of a lifeless asteroid belt was a meaningless gesture. They could only see the other worlds as horrible deviations from the cherished main trunk. Their reactions were as unweighed and hysterical as those of a murderer, who taking a last look around after an hour spent in obliterating possible clues, sees his victim feebly stir.

Thorn gathered his will power for what he knew he must do.

"Sikst?"

"Yes, destroy!"

"Septem?"

"Destroy!"

"Okt—"

But even as Prim remembered that there no longer was an Oktav and joined with the others in thinking destruction, even as the darkness began to rack and heave with a new violence, Thorn sent out the call.

"Whoever you may be, wherever you may be, Oh you who created it, here is the Divider of Time, here is the Probability Engine!"

His thought deafened him, like a great shout. He had not realized the degree to which the others had been thinking in the equivalent of muted whispers.

Instantly Prim and the rest were around him, choking his thoughts,

strangling his mind, thinking his destruction along with that of the worlds.

The throbbing of the darkness became that of a great storm, in which even the Probability Engine seemed on the verge of breaking from its moorings. Like a many-branched lightning-flash, came a vision of time-streams lashed and shaken—Worlds I and II torn apart—the invasion bridge snapped—

But through it Thorn kept sending the call. And he seemed to feel the eight talismans and the central engine take it up and echo it.

His mind began to suffocate. His consciousness to darken.

All reality seemed to tremble on the edge between being and not-being.

Then without warning, the storm was over and there was only a great quiet and a great silence present, that might have come from the end of eternity and might have been here always.

Awe froze their thoughts. They were like boys scuffling in a cathedral who look up and see the priest.

What they faced gave no sign of its identity. But they knew.

Then it began to think. Great broad thoughts of which they could only comprehend an edge or corner. But what they did comprehend was simple and clear.

XIV

And many a Knot unraveled by the Road
But not the Master-knot of Human Fate.
The Rubaiyat.

Our quest for our Probability Engine and its talismans has occupied many major units even of our own time. We have prosecuted it with diligence, because we were aware of the dangers that might arise if the engine were misused. We built several similar engines to aid us in the search, but it turned out that the catastrophe in our cosmos which swept away the engine and cast one of the talismans up on your time-stream and planet, was of an unknown sort, making the route of the talisman an untraceably random one. We would have attempted a canvass of reality, except that a canvass of an infinitude of infinitudes is impossible. Now our quest is at an end.

I will not attempt to picture ourselves to you, except to state that

we are one of the dominant mentalities in a civilized cosmos of a different curvature and energy-content than your own.

Regarding the Probability Engine—it was never intended to be used in the way in which you have used it. It is in essence a calculating machine, designed to forecast the results of any given act, weighing all factors. It is set outside space-time, in order that it may consider all the factors in space-time without itself becoming one of them. When we are faced with a multiple-choice problem, we feed each choice into the engine sucessively, note the results, and act accordingly. We use it to save mental labor on simple decision-making routines, and also for the most profound purposes, such as the determination of possible ultimate fates of our cosmos.

All this, understand, only involves forecasting—never the actualization of those forecasts.

But no machine is foolproof. Just because the Probability Engine was not made to create, does not mean that it cannot create, given sufficient mental tinkering. How shall I make it clear to you? I see from your minds that most of you are familiar with a type of wheeled vehicle, propelled by the internal combustion of gases, similar to vehicles used by some of the lower orders in our own cosmos. *You* would see in it only a means of transportation. But suppose one of your savages—someone possessing less knowledge than even yourselves—should come upon it. *He* might see it as a weapon—a ram, a source of lethal fumes, or an explosive mine. No safety devices you might install could ever absolutely prevent it from being used in that fashion.

You, discovering the Probability Engine, were in the same position as that hypothetic savage. Unfortunately, the engine was swept away from our cosmos with all its controls open—ready for tinkering. You poked and pried, used it, as I can see, in many ways, some close to the true one, some outlandishly improbable. Finally you worked off the guards that inhibit the engine's inherent reativity. You began to actualize alternate worlds.

In doing this, you completely reversed the function of the Probability Engine. We built it in order to avoid making unfavorable decisions. You used it to insure that unfavorable decisions would be made. You actualized worlds which for the most part would never have had a remote chance of existing, if you had left the decision up to the people inhabiting your world. Normally, even individuals of your caliber will

show considerable shrewdness in weighing the consequences of their actions and in avoiding any choice that seems apt to result in unpleasant consequences. You, however, forced the unwise choices to be made as well as the wise ones—and you continued to do this after your own race had acquired more real wisdom than you yourselves possessed.

For the Probability Engine in no way increased your mental stature. Indeed, it had just the opposite effect, for it gave you powers which enabled you to escape the consequences of your bad judgments—and it truckled to your delusions by only showing you what you wanted to see. Understand, it is just a machine. A perfect servant—not an educator. And perfect servants are the worst educators. True, you could have used it to educate yourselves. But you preferred to play at being gods, under the guise of performing scientific experiments on a world that you didn't faintly understand. Godlike, you presumed to judge and bless and damn. Finally, in trying to make good on your damnations, you came perilously close to destroying much more than you intended to—there might even have been unpleasant repercussions in our own cosmos.

And now, small things, what shall we do with you and your worlds? Obviously we cannot permit you to retain the Probability Engine or any of the powers that go with it or the talismans. Also, we cannot for a moment consider destroying any of the alternate worlds, with a view to simplification. That which has been given life must be allowed to use life, and that which has been faced with problems must be given an opportunity of solving them. If the time-splits were of more recent origin, we might consider healing them; but deviation has proceeded so far that that is out of the question.

We might stay here and supervise your worlds, delivering judgments, preventing destructive conflicts, and gradually lifting you to a higher mental and spiritual level. But we do not relish playing god. All our experiences in that direction have been unpleasant, making us conclude that, just as with an individual, no species can achieve a full and satisfactory maturity except by its own efforts.

Again, we might remain here and perform various experiments, using the set-ups which you have created. But that would be abhorrent.

So, small things, there being no better alternative, we will take away our engine, leaving the situation you have created to develop as it will—with transtime invasions and interworld wars no longer an immediate

prospect, though looming as a strong future possibility. With such sufferings and miseries and misunderstandings as exist, but with the future wide open and no unnatural constraints put on individuals sufficiently clear-headed and strong-willed to seek to avoid unpleasant consequences. And with the promise of rich and unusual developments lying ahead, since, so far as we know, your many-branched time-stream is unique among the cosmoses. We will watch your future with interest, hoping some day to welcome you into the commonwealth of mature beings.

You may say that we are at fault for allowing the Probability Engine to fall into your hands—and indeed, we shall make even stronger efforts to safeguard it from accident or tinkering in the future. But remember this. Young and primitive as you are, you are not children, but responsible and awakened beings, holding in your hands the key to your future, and with only yourselves to blame if you wantonly go astray.

As for you individuals who are responsible for all this botchwork, I sympathize with your ignorance and am willing to admit that your intentions were in part good. But you chose to play at being gods, and even ignorant and well-intentioned gods must suffer the consequences of their creations. And that shall be your fate.

With regard to you, Thorn, your case is of course very different. You responded to our blindly broadcast influencings, stole a talisman, and finally summoned us in time to prevent catastrophe. We are grateful. But there is no reward we can give you. To remove you from your environment to ours would be a meaningless gesture, and one which you would regret in the end. We cannot permit you to retain any talismanic powers, for in the long run you would be no better able to use them wisely than these others. We would like to continue your satisfying state of triplicated personality—it presents many interesting features—but even that may not be, since you have three destinies to fulfill in three worlds. However, a certain compromise solution, retaining some of the best features of the triplication, is possible.

And so, small things, we leave you.

From hastily chosen places of concealment and half-scooped foxholes around the Opal Cross, a little improvised army stood up. A few scattered fliers swooped down and silently joined them. The only

uniforms were those of a few members of the Extraterrestrial Service. Among the civilians were perhaps a score of Recalcitrant Infiltrants from World II, won over to last-minute co-operation by Thorn II.

The air still reeked acridly. White smoke and fumes came from a dozen areas where earth and vegetation had been blasted by subtronic weapons. And there were those who did not stand up, whose bodies lay charred or had vanished in disintegration.

The ground between them and the Opal Cross was still freshly scored by the tracks of great vehicles. There were still wide swathes of crushed vegetation. At one point a group of low buildings had been mashed flat. And it seemed that the air above still shook with the aftermath of the passage of mighty warcraft.

But of the great mechanized army that had been fanning out toward and above them, not one black-uniformed soldier remained.

They continued to stare.

In the Sky Room of the Opal Cross, the members of the World Executive Committee looked around at a similar emptiness. Only the tatters of Clawly's body remained as concrete evidence of what had happened. It was blown almost in two, but the face was untouched. This no longer showed the triumphant smile which had been apparent a moment before death. Instead, there was a look of horrified surprise.

Clawly's duplicate had vanished with the other black-uniformed figures.

The first to recover a little from the frozenness of shock was Shielding. He turned toward Conjerly and Tempelmar.

But the expression on the faces of those two was no longer that of conquerors, even thwarted and trapped conquerors. Instead there was a dawning, dazed amazement, and a long-missed familiarity that told Shielding that the masquerading minds were gone and the old Conjerly and Tempelmar returned.

Firemoor began to laugh hysterically.

Shielding sat down.

At the World II end of the broken transtime bridgehead, where moments before the Opal Cross had risen, now yawned a vast smoking pit, half-filled with an indescribable wreckage of war machines and

men, into which others were still falling from the vanished skylon—like some vision of Hell. To one side, huge even in comparison with that pit, loomed the fantastically twisted metal of the transtime machine. Ear-splitting sounds still echoed. Hurricane gusts still blew.

Above it all, like an escaping black hawk above an erupting volcano, Clawly flew. Not even the titanic confusion around him, nor the shock of the time-streams' split, nor his horror at his own predicament, could restrain his ironic mirth at the thought of how that other Clawly, in trying to kill him, had insured the change of minds and his own death.

Now he was forever marooned on World II, in Clawly II's body. But the memory chambers of Clawly II's brain were open to him, since Clawly II's mind no longer existed to keep them closed, and so at one bound he had become a half-inhabitant of World II. He knew where he stood. He knew what he must do. He had no time for regrets.

A few minutes' flying brought him to the Opal Cross and it was not long before he was admitted to the Servants Hall. There eleven shaken old men looked up vengefully at him from reports of disaster. Their chairman's puckered lips writhed as he accused: "Clawly, I have warned you before that your lack of care and caution would be your finish. We hold you to a considerable degree responsible for this calamity. It is possible that your inexcusably lax handling of the prisoner Thorn was what permitted word of our invasion to slip through to the enemy. We have decided to eliminate you." He paused, then added, a little haltingly, "Before sentence is carried out, however, do you have anything to say in extenuation of your actions?"

Clawly almost laughed. He knew this scene—from myth. The Dawn Gods blaming Loki for their failures, trying to frighten him—in hopes that he would think up a way to get them out of their predicament. The Servants were bluffing. They weren't even looking for a scapegoat. They were looking for help.

This was *his* world, he realized. The dangerous, treacherous world of which he had always dreamed. The world for which his character had been shaped. The world in which he could play the traitor's role as secret ally of the Recalcitrants in the Servants' camp, and prevent or wreck future invasions of World I. The world in which his fingers could twitch the cords of destiny.

Confidently, a gargoyle's smile upon his lips, he stepped forward to answer the Servants.

Briefly Thorn lingered in the extra-cosmic dark, before his tripled personality and consciousness should again be split. He knew that the True Owners of the Probability Engine had granted him this respite in order that he would be able to hit upon the best solution of his problem. And he had found that solution.

Henceforward, the three Thorns would exchange bodies at intervals, thus distributing the fortunes and misfortunes of their lives. It was the strangest of existences to look forward to—for each, a week of the freedoms and pleasures of World I, a week of the tyrannies and hates of World II, a week of the hardships and dangers of World III.

Difficulties might arise. Now, being one, the Thorns agreed. Separate, they might rebel and try to hog good fortune. But each of them would have the memory of this moment and its pledge.

The strangest of existences, he thought again, hazily, as he felt his mind beginning to dissolve, felt a three-way tug. But was it really stranger than any life? One week in heaven—one week in hell—one week in a frosty ghost-world—

And in seven different worlds of shockingly different cultures, seven men clad in the awkward and antique garments of the Late Middle Dawn Civilization, began to look around, in horror and dismay, at the consequences of their creations.

Crisis in Utopia

BY NORMAN L. KNIGHT

AN OUTLINE of the corporate structure and operating methods of Submarine Products Corporation would have amazed and baffled the economists and statesmen of an earlier age almost as much as the engineers and biologists of those ruggedly individualistic times would have been bewildered by its technical achievements. If the conception of such an organization had, in a moment of wishful reverie, entered the antique meditations of any of those worthies he would have dismissed it from his mind as a Utopian fantasy. And, relative to the conditions and limitations of his era, he would have been undeniably correct. Although known as a "corporation," the term was a hoary etymological survival; it connoted an entity vastly different from the "corporations" of the perplexed and troublous twentieth century. It approximated more nearly in meaning to the term "government" as then used with reference to nations. But Submarine Products Corporation administered the affairs of neither a race nor a nation; its domain was the sea, from surface to nethermost deep, and all the resources which lie therein. It was untroubled by questions of national sovereignty or of territorial boundaries, since these things had long since dwindled to mere section headings in history texts or items of realism in historical novels.

This quasi-governmental, lucidly practical yet idealistic association was planetary in its scope. It absorbed the thought and effort of over

ten million people drawn from a multitude of races. It interlocked with a galaxy of similar corporations which, in their aggregate, performed the multifarious work of the world. It was one organ in the world-embracing organism of terrestrial civilization.

This organism possessed a brain, officially designated as Prime Coordination Center but known familiarly as Prime Center. Prime Center exercised no arbitrary powers—had no need of such powers; it merely integrated a world which was rational and self-regulating to a degree beyond the hopes or dreams of the era of parliamentary government. It was the ultimate repository of facts and ideas, the universal forum of fundamental discussion and controversy, the incubator of vast projects, the fountainhead of information.

Information from Prime Center was disseminated through a network of subsidiary centers, among which was the Travel Bureau of Submarine Products Corporation, located on Andros Island in the Bahamas.

Our immediate interest now focuses upon the official sanctum of one Syrcamor, a travel counselor, whose domed consultation chamber was but one in a warren of similar chambers. Syrcamor sat before a console not unlike that of a pipe organ, in a curious high-backed, canopied chair of copper and steel sheathed in vitreous plastic. He scrutinized a printed tape which issued from a clicking mechanism on the console. A multiplex projector similar to that of a planetarium was suspended above the console from the center of the dome. At the moment the dome was a huge luminous map—one half of a concave terrestrial globe showing North America and portions of South America and the western Pacific Ocean. The arctic regions were behind the console; North America arched overhead.

The clicking mechanism ceased, the flow of tape halted, and Syrcamor touched a lever of the console. A musical hum followed, like the spinning of a giant top. Syrcamor's chair pulsed with a dim luminosity and he became enveloped in a tenuous bluish aura. At the same time a circular plate, set into the flat top of the console, glowed bluely; it discharged a nebulous corona of light which took form and seeming solidity, became the reduced three-dimensional image—one foot in height—of a man seated in a chair which duplicated Syrcamor's. Syrcamor addressed the toylike apparition.

"Larkmead, two youngsters are coming in to see me about a South-

ern Pacific cruise. What's the latest regarding the ban on the Triton Reef area?"

"The ban, so far as I know, is still on," replied the image f Larkmead. "The Reef Council has been in session all morning, going over the latest reports, but they've made no announcement. They may release everything for immediate broadcasting or they may wait another year. Who knows? In the meantime, it will be advisable to discourage your clients—discreetly, of course—from going below thirty degrees south in that region, as in the past."

"That's all I want to know," declared Syrcamor. He touched the lever, and the image disappeared.

This form of communication was not radio. It was space-wave telephony, utilizing transverse oscillations of space itself which were perpendicular to all three dimensions. The waves passed through matter almost unimpeded. The stereophone beam permitted of straight-line transmission through the mass of the Earth. It supplemented but had not replaced radio broadcasting and wired telephony, and was a standard item of submarine equipment.

"Send them in," said Syrcamor, apparently addressing the console.

A wall panel and a contiguous semicircular section of floor executed a half turn about a vertical axis. Two chairs of light metal were thereby rotated into the chamber, bringing with them a youth and a young girl. Both were clad in shorts and sleeveless tunics of overlapping silvery scales; they were shod with form-fitting knee-length boots of violet-blue synthetic leather, adorned only by the narrow glinting stripes of golden zippers.

Both were long-limbed and broad of shoulder. Some ancestral strain of tropic blood had endowed the youth with hair of unequivocal blackness—which he kept shorn close to the scalp—but prolonged exposures to the sun since early childhood had darkened his skin to the hue of terra cotta. Similar exposure in the girl's case had resulted only in a delicate pinkish-bronze tint, powdered over with an infinite number of minute freckles; even the backs of her fingers were freckled. Her hair glowed with the color of dully heated oxidized copper, and at the moment was confined in an elastic transparent sheath like a cap of glass.

Syrcamor consulted the printed tape.

"According to this information you are registered as SPC-17-NA-

136-Z4075; chosen name, Raven," Syrcamor began, glancing at the youth, "and you are listed as SPC-2-CB-136-819; chosen name, Topaz." He nodded toward the girl.

"You have proposed a voyage among the reefs and islands of the southern Pacific in your submersible cruiser, the *Kelonia,* which has been inspected and found to be in seaworthy condition. Both of you are certified navigators."

"That's right," affirmed Raven.

It should be remarked that this conversation did not take place in the English language, although an ancient American from the year 2000 A. D.—or, in fact, almost anyone from that period—might have detected a haunting familiarity in certain words.

"Your vessel is specially equipped for submarine photographic work," Syrcamor continued, reading from the tape, "and you have cruised and photographed extensively in the Caribbean area. Both of you are nineteen years of age and have selected your adult work—the creation of ornamental design. Your advisers have approved the proposed journey. If you will tell me something more about yourselves, I can advise you more intelligently."

"We're gathering material for animated marine murals," began Raven. "Right now we're working on submarine seascapes of coral reefs. Of course, we pick up a lot of other data, whether we have immediate use for it or not. We're sure of finding a wealth of new ideas among the Pacific islands. Two years have been allowed us for this cruise. Also, it's part of the regular training—mingling with other people in their own lands, taking part in other ways of living—all that sort of thing."

"And I have a sort of incidental project of my own," declared Topaz. "I like to make pictures of whales. We don't know enough about them. All we have is general information, hardly anything about whales as individuals. I'd like to follow a particular herd continuously—for months—take close-ups—"

"Wouldn't that be inadvisable in a small craft like the *Kelonia?*" inquired Syrcamor.

"It would," agreed Raven. "One good blow from the flukes of a whale— It wouldn't wreck us, but—I'd rather run aground at full speed."

"Old cautious Raven!" scoffed Topaz. "He talks just like our work

counselors. I've tried to have a big submersible built, shaped like a whale, but Prime Center says that there are so many other things to be done, more urgent things—"

"But you *have* decided that this cruise shall be primarily a quest for new ideas to use in your designing?" queried the counselor.

"Well, yes," conceded Topaz. "Whales are out—unless we run across them accidentally."

"Very well. Then let us begin," said Syrcamor, and touched the keys of the console.

The multiplex projector whirred softly and the luminous map shifted on the dome. The arctic and all but the westerly rim of the Americas slid from view; the easterly portion of Australia and the margin of Antarctica appeared, and all the island constellations of Oceania. He touched other keys, and a web of colored lines appeared on the blue expanse of ocean.

"What are those lines?" asked Raven.

"Transport routes—air, surface, submarine," replied the counselor. "It isn't what I meant to show. It's my error. I'll change it."

He reached for another key.

"Wait! Don't take them away yet!" exclaimed Topaz. "Why do they all avoid that big vacant spot in the south Pacific?"

"The transport centers are so located that no route goes through that area. There's very little in it—no large islands, a few insignificant shoals—just a great, monotonous expanse of empty waters. One might call it a sort of oceanic desert. The depths are mostly two or three thousand fathoms. The bottom is cold, covered with red clay or ooze, devoid of light except for phosphorescence, and inhabited by such creatures as one finds in any other of the great ocean deeps. The surface climate is predominantly cold and foggy. You wouldn't be interested in it."

Other keys clicked under Syrcamor's fingers, the transport routes vanished, and in their place appeared the contour curves of the ocean bottom together with two wavy red lines which spanned the sea north and south of the Equator.

"There you may see the shallows and atolls where one will find an infinitude of coralline scenery," remarked Syrcamor. "Also the two isotherms of average annual surface-water temperature of twenty degrees

centigrade. You won't find any corals outside of that belt except the less spectacular species."

"We know all that," observed Topaz. "Where shall we go first?"

"Suppose we begin with the Galapagos Islands," suggested the counselor. He indicated the group with a threadlike beam of light from a tube in his hand. "Submarine Products has some magnificent fish hatcheries there. Have you ever gone into a hatchery pool? Have you ever walked through a school of ten million small fry on a day of bright sunshine? You will find it an unforgettable experience. Then you might go on to the Marquesas—"

"We could drop down to Easter Island and Pitcairn on the way," interjected Raven.

"A good suggestion," agreed Syrcamor.

"We might even go as far south as the antarctic drift ice!" exclaimed Topaz. "I'd like to get a squid's-eye view of some icebergs."

"Hold on! That's a cruise in itself!" objected Raven. "What are we going after? Corals or icebergs?"

"I am afraid that I, also, must disapprove of that idea," smiled Syrcamor. "Unpleasant things can happen very suddenly to small submersibles among the ice floes. You need a larger vessel and more companions for an antarctic trip. I strongly advise that you make Easter Island your 'farthest south' until you reach the vicinity of New Zealand."

"You're right, of course," Topaz reluctantly admitted. "So we start out this way: Galapagos, Easter, Pitcairn, Marquesas. Then what?"

II

Even the veriest landlubber would have said that the *Kelonia* was not built for abnormal speed. She was sixty-five feet long and forty-three feet in the beam, and shaped like half an egg—sliced the long way—with the smaller end at the stern. The bottom was not flat, but slightly convex. The control cabin was housed within the elongated hump of the conning tower at the summit of her rounded hull. Sheathed and almost concealed within the nether part of that hull were a sturdy pair of caterpillar treads wherewith the craft might crawl on a reasonably smooth bottom or, on a favorable shore, beach herself. Pop-

ularly and with obvious appropriateness the *Kelonia* and all kindred vessels were known as turtle boats. An antiquarian versed in the gruesome chronicles of that long-defunct monstrosity, mechanized warfare, might have compared her to a seagoing tank.

The hull of the *Kelonia* was neither riveted nor welded, but had been sprayed on a refractory mold, to an accompaniment of flame and thunder, with a device known to technicians as a molecular accretion blast. It was a continuous, seamless shell wrought of alloyed monotopic aluminum and tantalum—that is to say, of the purified isotopes possessing maximum tensile strength and toughness. It could have withstood the assaults of a dozen whales; Raven's concern over such an encounter was prompted by a consideration for certain more fragile internal fittings.

To understand the motive power of the *Kelonia* it must be borne in mind that she was a product of the so-called Age of the Space Warp. She was essentially a rocket craft in which the rockets were jets of water expelled by turbines, which in turn were field-geared to space-warp vortex motors. The heart of the vortex motor was a single cylindrical crystal of monotopic iron within which—to state the facts simply and therefore inaccurately—a very tight, helical space warp had been established. As the space distortion unwound, the cylinder of iron rotated with it. The true theory of this whirling cylinder—the vortex rotor—may be stated only in mathematical symbols. A jaded engineering student was credited with the remark that to construct a vortex rotor one obtains a bucketful of space-warp functions and screws them together.

When submerged, the *Kelonia* breathed like a fish. Her turbines sucked in water through intake grids in the bows, drew it through a plankton filter—which periodically ejected its accumulations—and thence to the aërophores—ingenious osmotic gadgets which were essentially artificial gills wrought of chrome-platinum and silicoid. From the aërophores the hurtling stream passed through the turbines and so to the propulsion jets.

In spite of her unwieldy shape—designed primarily to provide spacious living quarters—the *Kelonia* was surprisingly tractable when a skilled hand controlled her valves and diving planes. Both Raven and Topaz possessed that requisite skill, bred of long practice and a deep-rooted love of the sea and all pertaining thereto. Both had been born within sound of the surf; the rearing of both had been "sponsored" by

Submarine Products Corporation. They spelled each other in the navigation of the *Kelonia,* and at the moment the craft was cruising with a comfortable depth of five fathoms over her conning tower and Topaz at the controls. Raven's dark poll appeared above the rim of the circular companionway in the control-cabin deck.

"Where are we now?" inquired Raven.

"Forty miles from Easter Island, six degrees north of west. I've laid the course for Pitcairn."

"How is it topside?"

"Rather jumpy. We'll make better time by staying down under."

Through the forward observation port Topaz looked out into a jade-green void, agitated by the million-shafted play of sunbeam javelins which waxed and waned with the passage of cloud shadows. The remoter distances were veiled as by successive curtains of diaphanous green gauze. The surface, seen from below, was an undulating ceiling of green-silvered glass from which depended occasional bristling chandeliers of floating algæ, twinned by their upward reflections.

"Let the rob take over for a while; then come below to the galley," Raven requested; the robot to which he referred was an automatic pilot in a chamber below deck. "I've steamed some kaffina, and besides I want to tell you something I've been thinking of."

The pungent, golden aroma of kaffina—the latter-day synthetic successor to coffee—rose around him through the companionway as he spoke.

In the compact, immaculate galley of the *Kelonia* four telescreens set in the walls faithfully duplicated the view from the observation ports of the conning tower. The kaffina urn, plated with lunar gold, was Topaz's especial treasure.

"I thought of something that Syrcamor said, back there at the Travel Bureau," Raven announced after a long, appreciative draft of the steaming kaffina. "You remember—when he put on the transport routes by mistake and you asked about the big blank spot in the ocean. Well, why did he say, 'You wouldn't be interested in it'?"

A gong boomed urgently, the vessel tilted, the kaffina sloshed inside the urn. Raven glanced at the forward telescreen.

"Obstacle monitor spotted a shark and we started to dive under," he commented. "That's the only fault of the rob; it can't think. But as I was about to say: Why wouldn't we be interested? We're not closing

our eyes to everything except coral reefs. Anything under the sea or on it is grist for our mill. He was a little too insistent on the emptiness of the ocean south of Easter Island. By the time we left, I felt as if the whole south Pacific, from there to the edge of the drift ice, were just one big swimming pool with a vitrolith bottom filled with sterile distilled water."

"I noiced that myself," agreed Topaz. "I felt that he was going out of his way to convince us that we didn't want to go any farther south."

"Imagine being a thousand miles from the nearest speck of an island," Raven went on. "Two or three miles of water under us. Nothing but sea and sky for several days' cruising in any direction. And it's merely nonsense to talk about 'empty waters' when just under the surface is a whole floating world of life. I move that we change our course and make—say, a seven-day run due south before we go on to Pitcairn. Probably we'd see some whales. But don't try to argue me into continuing on to the ice zone. Syrcamor was right about that."

Topaz burst into laughter. "All morning I've been thinking the same thing and wanting to ask you about it. Let's plot a new course now—south."

"Let's—but on one condition: no close-ups of whales," concluded Raven, with a final hasty gulp of kaffina.

By nightfall the *Kelonia* was plowing southward along the one hundred and tenth meridian (west), surface-cruising under robot control in what was close to a dead calm, with a glimmer of phosphorescence in her wake. An observer in the air, had there been one, would have seen nothing upon that dark waste of waters under the Southern Cross save the navigation lights of the submersible and their ripple-shattered reflections.

On the sixth night out from Easter Island, Raven awoke in his dark cabin from dreams of parched and burning deserts. He lay marveling at the realism of his dream; his throat was dry and he was outrageously thirsty. He still could feel the desert heat. Then he sat bolt upright. He *could* feel the desert heat. At least, the air in the cabin was like the air of an oven. He grasped the edge of his bunk—and touched hot metal! Sleep and amazement struggled in his brain like whirling vapors. He switched on the light, leaped into his trunks, ran barefooted from the cabin and collided with Topaz in the passage.

"What's going on in this ship?" demanded Topaz. "Did you turn up the thermostat? Surely you didn't expect to reach the drift-ice zone before morning—not in this tub."

"I don't know anything yet, except that I'm practically desiccated," answered Raven. "And there's a foul whiff of something in the air. Hydrogen sulphide! Come aloft to the tower."

"Phew! It's growing stronger," muttered Topaz as they scurried up the conning-tower companionway.

They rapidly examined the instrument panels.

"The thermostat's just as we left it," Raven announced. "The monitors haven't spotted anything since we turned in. Rotors and turbines are pumping right along. Aërophores shut off, the way I left them. We're breathing surface air. Ventilator's all right. No trouble lights showing. This stench must be from outside. Hm-m-m. Barometer down—weather brewing. But the outside air temperature! Look at this! Fifty-one! No wonder we're baking! It's impossible!"

"If that's impossible, then what do you call this?" inquired Topaz, pointing at the water-temperature recorder. The instrument showed a steady climb to fifty-nine degrees Centigrade and was still slowly, inexorably rising.

III

The two youngsters regarded each other in blank astonishment. Then Raven asked:

"What time is it?"

"A big help, that! Look at the clock. It's four fifteen in the morning, if you must know."

"I was wondering how far we had come. The log will show it, of course. My thoughts are slightly curdled. *Ugh!* Even the deck is hot! Let's turn on the bow floodlight and open the hatch."

The conning-tower hatch flew open with a *clang,* emitting a murky glow from the control cabin. The wonder-stricken faces of Raven and Topaz rose from the aperture. For a moment their minds did not register exactly what they saw. The *Kelonia* drove ahead smoothly as if on a sea of oil.

"Fog!" exclaimed Topaz, coughing. "No, it's steam! Steam and gas! The ocean's steaming!"

"It's almost thick enough to swim in," observed Raven, coughing also. "And the floodlight—a white blob. Your face is just a blurred spot. And the odor—"

"Hydrogen sulphide with a dash of sulphur dioxide and chlorine," finished Topaz, sniffing and wheezing. "Something else, too. A dead-fish odor. There must be tons of 'em afloat. There! Hear that bumping alongside?"

Raven's mental equilibrium was returning.

"We're right on top of a volcanic outbreak in the ocean bottom," he decided as he closed the hatch, "or entering the edge of it. If we keep on going we may find ourselves in the middle of a sort of cosmic stew pot. If only we could get some pictures of the ocean actually boiling—"

"You'd have to take them submerged. Think of the steam."

"We might do it with infrared, but we're not going to try. We'll get out of this the same way we got in."

To avoid the stench which entered through her surface ventilator the *Kelonia* fled five fathoms down and started her aërophores—which happily were adjusted to extract nothing from sea water save nitrogen and oxygen. Hoping to find cooler levels below, she descended to her limit—one hundred fathoms—but secured no relief. The limit was a "robot setting" installed by the makers, to circumvent youthful venturesomeness.

Returning to the five-fathom level, Raven started the air-cooling unit. The hour of sunrise passed, and still the vessel groped her way—trusting her radio monitor beams—through a Stygian darkness which testified to the dense pall of steam and gas which lay upon the sea. By means of the sonic detector the voyagers heard far-off rumblings and thuddings from the ocean bottom, three miles below, like the turbulence of a giant caldron.

A heavy storm swept across the sea, raised twenty-foot waves, sent the *Kelonia* down to ten fathoms. The navigators pored over the charts which had been given them by the Travel Bureau.

"'Just a great, monotonous expanse of empty waters,'" quoted Raven caustically, "that's what Syrcamor called it. Let's phone him about the boiling-hot monotony that we ran into. Why didn't he warn us?"

"I don't believe that Syrcamor knew about this," rejoined Topaz,

"because if this were why he didn't want us to go below Easter Island, there's no reason why he shouldn't have told us. He was trying to divert our thoughts from this part of the sea because of something else—something he knows. Now look. The survey for this square is over two hundred years old. Syrcamor said as much, and here it is in the corner—'Based on SPC Hydrographic Survey Data, 3927.' You can see that they did a very thorough job. This vulcanism must have commenced later—perhaps recently."

"But can this be the first outbreak? And as soon as the sea bottom started popping off as it's doing now, it would register on every seismograph in the world."

"What if it did? Look where we are on this earthquake chart—in the dark-blue zone, and that means 'Region of Frequent Earthquake Occurrence.' It would be just another earthquake, down here in the back yard of the world, so why should anyone grow particularly curious about it?"

"Why hasn't some chance flier spotted the place from the air and reported it? It would be hard to overlook a cloud of steam a mile or so high and several miles across—which I suppose it is."

"Not so hard if one were fifty or sixty miles up, where the transports are—and transports don't fly this way. And any chance wanderers, like us, who might be nosing around in small cruisers without precipitators and low enough to notice it—they'd take it for ordinary fog and give it a wide berth. Down here, it's cloudy or foggy half of the time, and who's going out of his way to fly through fog in the first place? No, I don't believe that Syrcamor knew of this condition; but he does know of something else and tried to steer us away from it."

The blackness of the observation ports changed to a dusky blue-green.

"Look! Sunshine!" ejaculated Raven. "We're out from under the fog. How's the water temperature?"

"Twenty-five."

"Too high for this latitude, but tolerable enough. The bottom must be warm all around here. Tune in the Pitcairn and Easter beacons, Topaz, and check our position. We'll bear south again."

Raven took the *Kelonia* to the surface, found the roughness of the sea continuing but much diminished, noted that the air was free of ob-

noxious gases, cast a weather eye at the partly overcast afternoon sky, and settled down to five fathoms. He whistled cheerfully as he scrutinized the green immensity beyond the forward port.

"This is like navigating the Gulf Stream," he remarked. "The topside is matted with sargassum weed—imagine that! Here's a raft of it now. Look! You can't see the end of it."

The *Kelonia* passed into a verdant dimness like the twilight of forest glades. In truth, the comparison is not farfetched. A veritable forest floated above her, an inverted forest, a floating island of sargassum three fathoms thick. Long pendulous beards of it trailed down even lower—brushed the *Kelonia's* periscope televesor.

A huge shadow detached itself from the floating forest—a shadow shaped like a monstrous bat, white-bellied, whip-tailed, devil-horned. It glided toward the *Kelonia.*

"Topaz!" shouted Raven. "The bow camera! Here's a manta ray! Three fathoms spread, or I'm a sea squirt!"

"Background of light through sargassum," murmured Topaz, becoming very active at another panel and applying her eyes to a sort of visor like an old-fashioned stereoscope. "Marvelous! I've got it!"

The great shape wheeled like a swallow and skimmed into the obscurity of far green distances.

"Queer we should see one here," reflected Raven. "The mantas are bottom feeders. Topaz, what's bottom?"

"Twenty-five fathoms," announced Topaz, consulting the radio echo-sounder. "Why, that can't be right."

"Of course not. You've dropped a couple of zeros. The chart says it ought to be about twenty-two hundred."

But the echo-sounder stubbornly insisted on indicating ever-decreasing depths. When the reading had fallen to twenty-three fathoms another photographic flurry occurred. A pair of giant sea horses swam with stately deliberation, in their strange but characteristic vertical position, across the *Kelonia's* bow. They were fully twelve feet in length, sea horses fit for Tritons, with rippling manes of tattered kelp-like excrescences.

"A new species, a new genus even!" gloated Topaz. "Wait till Prime Center sees this! But they're so big! How have they been overlooked? I'm going to run this through the projector."

The most surprising event which yet had occurred in Syrcamor's

"great, monotonous expanse of empty waters" took place within half an hour after the passage of the giant sea horses. Topaz having retired to the photographic cabin, Raven was temporarily alone in the conning tower. The *Kelonia* was maintaining her depth of five fathoms.

Raven suddenly sensed the aura of an intruding presence. He glanced hastily around the control cabin; then his eyes fell upon the observation port aft. A human-seeming face was regarding him through the clear silicoid of the port—a masculine, youthful face. But its smoothly rounded cranium was quite devoid of hair, being covered with faintly phosphorescent tubercles. It had no visible ears and its skin was a lustrous purplish-black like the skin of a salamander. A pair of blunt protuberances like incipient horns projected from its temples. The eyes showed no whites; they were a rich and liquid brown, all pupil, with a glow of greenish luminosity in their depths. It smiled with a flash of white teeth—startling by contrast—and proceeded slowly to execute the lip movements of speech, then paused expectantly as if awaiting some response from Raven.

"Topaz! Drop everything and come to the tower!" Raven called urgently into the ship's telephone, then turned again to regard the face at the port.

A second face, obviously feminine, had now appeared beside the first. At first glance this being seemed to possess a thick mop of bejeweled indigo-blue hair, but closer scrutiny revealed a Medusa crown of close-set tentacular filaments, each tipped with a beadlike light organ. They rippled in the eddies which swirled around the *Kelonia's* conning tower, writhed and stirred with an independent life of their own.

"Name of a green porpoise! What are those things!" ejaculated Topaz, pausing transfixed as she emerged from the companionway.

"Should *I* know? There's nothing like them known in the four worlds! Their faces are anthropoid, so I suppose they're terrestrial."

"They seem to be speaking to one another, Raven. How can that be?"

"It must be that they're merely going through the motions. It's lip-reading, a practically forgotten art. I've read about it."

"You mean that they can watch our lips and understand what we're saying?"

"So they might, if they speak the human tongue. I hadn't thought of that. I'll speak to them."

Raven gazed directly into the eyes of the enigmatic visitors and slowly uttered the words:

"Do you understand what I am saying?"

The two heads nodded eagerly.

"Then if you want to communicate with us you must use the Emergency Code. Do you know what that is? Tap on the hull," Raven concluded.

Again the visitors nodded their comprehension, the masculine head vanished from the port, and a rapid metallic tapping became audible in the conning tower.

The Emergency Code to which Raven referred was a system of signaling which had not been excelled in two thousand years for simplicity and adaptability to makeshift apparatus. The name of the inventor was the theme of a perennial minor controversy among historians; no printed data regarding him had survived the catastrophic twentieth century, and a fragment of sound film from around 1950 was not too clear as to enunciation. His name may have been either Marsh or Morris.

"We have swum too far from our base," the tapping signals spelled quickly. "We are near the limit of our endurance. Need food and rest. We beg you to open your air lock and admit us to your vessel."

"Shall we?" asked Raven doubtfully.

"*Shall* we?" Topaz echoed indignantly. "What a question! Of course we shall! This is terrific! It seems that we've discovered a marine species of Man—where they've been hidden I can't imagine—and you ask, 'Shall we let them in?' And we're the first ones to see them! Open that air lock!"

The inner door of the air lock thudded shut and the two ocean dwellers faced Raven and Topaz in the diving locker of the *Kelonia.* They were a head taller than the young navigators, and their bodies seemed molded of ebony with a purplish sheen. Their features were Polynesian rather than Negroid. Their only garments were sandals and elastic cinctures which sparkled bluely as if covered with dust of sapphires. Various small implements and containers were attached to the waistbands. The protuberances on their foreheads quivered, then uncoiled like giant butterflies' proboscises and expanded into membranous, fronded antennæ with cartilaginous midribs. Against the luminous ceiling of the diving locker the fronds of membrane showed

translucent, a deep ruby-red, and throbbed with the pulsations of blood. Raven and Topaz involuntarily retreated a step.

The male individual coughed, gasped, spurted triple jets of water from openings in his sides beneath the armpits, and spoke. His voice was a resonant bass.

"These appendages which startle you are auditory organs," he informed them. "I am called Cragstar, and my companion is Merling. We are not, as you may think, some sort of strange other-world creatures. Strictly speaking, we are not human; yet you can see for yourselves that we and you are similar in many respects. We are—what shall I say?—other-human. Submarine Products has called us Tritons, a name which we feel was admirably conceived."

"Submarine Products!" repeated Raven, his mind spinning dizzily. "You mean—"

"I mean . . . we are . . . a sort of creation," Cragstar replied laboriously, as if thinking were difficult.

"Why have we never heard of you?" asked Topaz.

"You shall be told everything in due time," replied Merling, leaning wearily on Cragstar's arm, "but at present we need food and sleep. If we had not chanced upon your cruiser— We were overconfident of our prowess as swimmers. How far are we from Easter Island?"

"At least nine hundred miles!" Topaz exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that you have swum from Easter Island!"

"No. Easter Island was our destination," responded Cragstar. "It was very ill-advised. But we were desperate, and acted hastily. We fled from Triton Reef—"

He hesitated, swayed, thrust a hand against the air-lock door to steady himself.

"No more questions!" commanded Topaz. "What are we thinking of, Raven? Help them to our cabins. I'll go ahead and start the kaffina. Do you drink kaffina?"

"For that, and food, and sleep, we shall be eternally grateful," Cragstar declared. "Afterward you shall have the whole story."

IV

"All this is more than a little bewildering," protested Raven. "You say that this reef was thrust up to the surface more than two centuries ago, yet it has never appeared on any chart."

"It has been rising slowly during a much longer period of time," corrected Cragstar, "and I should have said that it did appear on a few highly confidential charts in the possession of Prime Center and Submarine Products Corporation. The region was never a much-traveled one; by various subtle means Prime Center caused it to be traveled even less. But in spite of this, the Reef was occasionally discovered by private cruisers. The navigator would complain about the obsolete chart. Submarine Products would reply, 'These volcanic islets come and go very erratically. It will be included in the next revision—if it is still there.' And there the matter would rest and be forgotten."

The four were taking their ease in the cluttered seagoing studio aboard the *Kelonia* wherein Raven and Topaz produced experimental photosketches of their animated murals. The complex bulk of a drafting robot dominated the cabin. The newcomers had been invigorated by fourteen hours' sleep and such nourishment as they had judged appropriate to their exhausted condition. This prolonged sojourn out of water seemed to cause them no discomfort, but their bodies had assumed a different hue—a rich plum-tinted gray with an oily gloss. Merling's crown of medusoid filaments lay upon the nape of her neck in a satiny, blue-black mass wherein the restless light buds stirred like an uneasy swarm of pale fireflies.

"You call yourselves Tritons, as if you were something nonhuman, or another species," commented Topaz. "Yet you say that you're as human as we are—with a difference. And I gather that Submarine Products has somehow created you, and a whole community of others like you, in this uncharted place which you call Triton Reef. Do you mean that you are human beings—made over?"

"If you're thinking of plastic surgery the answer is no," Merling replied. "We were born just as you see us, of Triton parents. But in a sense we are reconstructed human beings. The first Tritons were—Did you ever hear of a tectogenetic species?"

"The world is full of them; most of our domestic animals and plants are that kind of species," responded Raven. "I know how they're produced, in a general sort of way, but I didn't know that the technique had reached a point where it could be applied to human beings. There you have the brain to consider. You take living chromosomes, break them down into their separate genes and preserve the genes alive in pure culture. You can do all sorts of strange things with the isolated

gene cultures. Then you rebuild the chromosomes into a new pattern and implant them in denucleated germ cells. From there on it's a simple matter of gestation—or seed formation if you're working with plants—*in vitro*. The process doesn't create life. It merely shapes living matter into new forms."

"Pater Vervain himself could not have explained it more concisely," observed Cragstar, "and the process *can* be applied to human material —due care being taken not to tamper with the brain, which continues to be too uncertain an undertaking for the biotechnicians. Submarine Products has applied it, and we are specimens of the result."

"But why should the affair have been so shrouded in secrecy?" Topaz objected. "Why was this unheard-of reef chosen as the scene of operations? It isn't in keeping with the modern spirit. Everyone should know about the Tritons. The mere fact that you exist—it's the disclosure of a whole new world—"

"In a word, it opens a vista of limitless possibilities," declared Cragstar. "Therein lies the answer to your questions. About ten generations ago the world peered into that vista and was frightened by what it saw. Prime Center proposed a very conservative scheme for eliminating various troublesome items of the human anatomy by gradually replacing the existing race with an improved tectogenetic variety. Obviously this would take a very long time, but it stirred up a tremendous wave of opposition—not unanimous, but quite overwhelming. 'What really are we proposing to do?' it was argued. 'If we make these seemingly innocent changes, what will follow? Will not these first changes in the human body be followed by still others, ever more and more radical as the technique improves? What of the social consequences? Will there not be inevitable friction between normal humanity and these others? Will there not be an ever-widening gulf between us and them, even a rebirth of war?' Such were the words which flew about the world, even before the idea of the Tritons was conceived."

"How queer people were then!" Topaz interjected. "I remember talking about that with our counselor in history."

"Among the biotechnicians at Prime Center there was one by the name of Tamarac," Cragstar continued. "He accused his colleagues of timidity because they heeded the popular clamor and decided to pigeonhole the project. He jeered at the project itself as lacking in boldness. Instead of modestly planning to eliminate the vermiform

appendix and a few other trifles, Tamarac suggested the creation of a radically new human species. He pointed to the waters of the world and said: 'Here is a domain covering more than seventy-five percent of our planet's surface. At present we are mere awkward intruders in that domain, with our armor and submersibles. Let us devise a kind of Man who can dwell in the waters as well as on the land, and make the whole Earth truly ours.' He was persuasive and persistent, and Prime Center was predisposed in his favor. They couldn't refrain from going into the project; it was much too intriguing."

"We've never heard of the project," asserted Raven. "There are suggestions afloat that something of the sort might be attempted."

"Test buoys. Prime Center set them afloat," responded Cragstar. "The whole affair was conducted very discreetly; all the workers were carefully selected. Triton Reef appeared not long after Tamarac had proposed his scheme, and Submarine Products transformed it into a biotechnical base. They quietly discouraged travel in that region, delayed the revision of charts, diverted transport lines. And Prime Center set about subtly molding public opinion through the educational system."

"This base at Triton Reef—tell us about it."

"No part of it is visible above water. From the air, the Reef appears to be no more than a straggling cluster of crags and barren islets. But down below, caverns have been hollowed out, level below level, filled with air, with watertight linings and air locks. The shallower parts of the bottom have been covered with submarine roofs of silicoid, part of the water pumped out, and submarine pools and air spaces thereby created. The Reef has its own power plant, circulating conditioned air and sea water, submersible docks, a foundry and workshops, schools and laboratories, dwelling pools for the Tritons. In short, we have everything but freedom of movement. It is understood that no Triton shall leave the immediate neighborhood of the Reef."

"And you two grew weary of confinement?"

"Every Triton grows weary of it, but that isn't why we tried to escape. As a matter of fact, Prime Center notified us over a month ago that we might commence preparations for abandoning the Reef. It seems that the world is nearly ready to be told about us. We shall be accepted as human beings, not monstrosities."

"Then why—"

"We younger Tritons have stirred up trouble for ourselves," Cragstar began slowly, coiling and uncoiling his auditory antennæ. "You see, the elders grew up under the shadow of a fear—the fear of they knew not what unpleasant treatment at the hands of a hostile world, if that world should discover them. And now that we seem to be on the eve of our release from Triton Reef, they desire nothing to occur which might revive that hostility. But some of us have been trained as biotechnicians, and we feel that the Triton is merely a preliminary step. We want to go on to more ambitious attempts."

"Of course; that's obvious," Raven agreed. "But what have you in mind?"

"The workers who created the first Tritons really made no great changes in the human form," argued Cragstar, as if he addressed some unseen tribunal. "Instead of lungs we have a gill cavity which—out of water—functions as a lung. Our fingers are webbed together up to the first joint." He held up his hand. "We have antennæ instead of ears. We are not inconvenienced by a stomachful of sea water nor considerable variations in depth pressure. There are still other lesser differences. But we are nevertheless manlike beings, and our mental powers are not measurably different from those of normal humanity.

"But is this to be the end? Must we forever restrain ourselves from going beyond the Triton? We shall populate the sea; what of the air? What of the vast world of little things, where flowers are trees and a meadow is a boundless forest? What of our neighbor planets, where Man exists only as an alien? What of the unknown worlds among the stars?"

"As Raven has said, there is the brain to consider," Merling went on. "Very few people have dared to alter the human cerebral genes; the results have been discouraging—sometimes horrifying. But we can't evade the logic of the facts. We must come to grips with this problem of the brain and conquer it—even though it may mean the creation of a whole menagerie of experimental monsters."

"And when we have conquered the problem of the brain," added Cragstar, "Man will begin to mold his brain as he has now begun to mold his body, and the Universe will be in the palm of his hand."

"Magnificent!" cried Raven. "And do you mean to tell me that your counselors don't approve of these ideas? You said that you had stirred up trouble for yourselves."

"Our elders think that they are rather horrible ideas," replied Merling. "They are afraid that the world will turn against us. One elder in particular, called Cymorpagon, has been very vehement. Pater Vervain said that their fears are unfounded. Pater Vervain is our general counselor and the only Drylander on the Reef; Prime Center gradually withdrew the others as the Tritons became self-sufficient. We had a shocking row with Cymorpagon and the other elders. Pater Vervain was on our side, but that didn't help."

"What happened?"

"Cymorpagon tried to browbeat us into abandoning our plans. He demanded that we promise never to mention them again. When we refused, with Pater Vervain's support, the elders seized control of the Reef. They placed all the exits under guard and took over the submersible docks and the stereophone transmitting station. Cymorpagon assumed command of everything and wouldn't permit Pater Vervain to communicate with Prime Center. He ordered that all the younger Tritons who favored the brain research should be hypnotically conditioned, so that all the rest of our lives we should look on the idea with horror and wouldn't dare to refer to it. So we all retreated to one of the dwelling pools and locked ourselves in."

"Locked yourselves in a pool? I don't understand."

"It's a lake, really, in a submarine air space with a silicoid roof. The portal is a sort of valve. We couldn't appeal to Prime Center, because the elders had control of the stereophone. The nearest transmitter that we know of is located at Easter Island. Cragstar and I thought that by swimming and drifting we might be able to go that far. Oh, we realize that it was absurd. The others cut a power line and stopped an air blower. We went through an air duct and the blower and came out of a vent on one of the islets of the Reef.

"One doesn't really appreciate distances when looking at charts—especially if one has never traveled more than a few miles. After swimming one day and night we began to understand the true vastness of the sea."

"The night swimming was the worst," said Cragstar. "We seemed to be hanging in a gulf of blackness and not making an inch of progress. And there were things swimming in the blackness—things with lights on them. We couldn't tell whether they were near and small or far away and gigantic. We were afraid to sleep. We saw the lights of

your craft on the second day, heard her turbines humming. It was a beacon of hope. Merling lost her tube of food concentrate the day before."

Raven leaped to his feet.

"The *Kelonia* and all its resources are at your service," he announced. "First of all, let's get Prime Center on the phone."

▼

At latitude thirty-nine south, longitude one hundred and twelve west, the sea birds wheeled and flapped through turbulent wraiths of milk-white fog. They soared, mewing and clamoring, upon the updrafts of a steady southeast breeze, skimmed the sleek crests of an interminable procession of pearl-gray rollers like marching hills. They saw the mile-long billows sweep out of the fog-veiled beyond, saw them smash thunderously against a splintered battlement of black igneous rock, saw them leap heavenward in shuddering geysers of spume and collapse in cataracts of foaming wrath. The fog parted capriciously, opened up a colossal moving corridor beyond the barrier, and revealed a multitude of close-set rocky tusks and islets—a desolate, spray-drenched archipelago. One could have imagined it to be the emergent peaks of a primeval continent rising from the steaming seas of a youthful world. Yet under that bleak, inorganic mask of somber crags and foaming waters there pulsed a current of strange life in the deep caverns and green-lit pools of the Triton community.

The conference hall of Vervain, the general counselor of Triton Reef, was twelve fathoms below sea level. The smooth green walls of vitrolith, inlaid with faintly luminous shapes of cuttlefish and sea anemones, were pierced along one side of the chamber by three great circular ports of silicoid, immensely thick. These openings revealed the cunningly lighted depths of a submarine gorge, forested with the slender spires of needle-tufted algæ, and admitted a diffuse berylline radiance. A giant sea horse sought with futile persistence to swim through the clear substance of the central port.

An uninformed observer, seeing the chamber in its green obscurity, might have wondered whether it was a hall of statuary or a museum of pathologial specimens. It was crowded with motionless, ambiguous figures—some human in form, others unclassifiable—ranging in

size from dwarfs to ten-foot giants. There were bodies without heads, heads without bodies, detached limbs, limbless torsos, skinless creatures displaying their muscles, skeletons, and complete forms. Actually they were anatomical models with skeletons of metal and artificial musculatures—students' exercises in construction, and the discarded sketches of beings conceived in the restless brains of ten generations of tectogeneticists.

Vervain stood beside an erect, biped test model whose head was a lens-eyed globe of aluminum; instead of arms it possessed thick, jointless tentacles terminating in hands; steel ribs glinted from beneath the unfinished muscular covering of the body. Facing the counselor was a delegation of Triton elders. Elders and counselor were clad only in sandals and cinctures of scintillating mineral fabric; no more was necessary in the uniform internal climate of Triton Reef.

"Assume that I submit to your ultimatum," suggested Vervain, regarding the elders quizzically. "Assume that I agree to inform Prime Center that these determined youngsters are irresponsible and unprepared for liberty—which emphatically I do not believe—and then, when you have given me access to the stereophone, what is to prevent me from stating my true opinion?"

"Then we should shut off the transmitter, Pater Vervain," declared one of the Tritons. "But we know that you would not stoop to trickery. We ask only your co-operation."

"You seek it by strange methods, Kalamar," retorted Vervain. "The whole situation is preposterous. Here am I, a prisoner in my own quarters, without light or power—"

"Your circuit has been broken in the Dolphin Pool, where the rebels barricaded themselves," explained Kalamar. "They shut off a blower, and we suspect that some of them may have escaped through the air vent. But the vent has been sealed, and the aërators of Dolphin Pool have, of course, been shut off also. But there is still air in the pool. Hunger, not lack of oxygen, will defeat these obstinate ones."

"We have not had your answer," another elder remarked bluntly. "Will you speak to Prime Center as requested?"

"When I do speak, Cymorpagon, it will be on my own responsibility and not in accordance with arbitrary instructions," replied Vervain in a pleasant conversational tone. "I shall merely wait upon events. Prime Center will call us if we do not call them. If I do not respond in per-

son, you must sorely tax your ingenuity in explaining my nonappearance."

"In plain words, you refuse," declared Cymorpagon. "Therefore, I shall confer with Prime Center and shall say that you have appointed me as your spokesman."

Cymorpagon differed from the other elders. He was hugely built, apelike in depth of chest and length of arm. His head was depressed between his shoulders with scarcely a vestige of neck, and his eyes glowed beneath a continuous horizontal supraorbital ridge. His auditory antennæ were short, stumpy tentacles with terminal tufts of bristling black spines.

"For me to appoint a spokesman would be unprecedented," Vervain observed. "Certainly you would find it difficult to explain, and it would cause an immediate investigation. When in due time you return to rational thinking, I am sure that all of you will see yourselves in a somewhat humiliating light."

The air of the conference hall was shaken by the sound of a remote, ominous growling. The vitrolith pavement quivered, and some small object fell with a metallic tinkle.

"Ready or not, we have there a cogent reason for abandoning the Reef," remarked Vervain. "The shocks are becoming more frequent."

"The Reef has been shaken by occasional feeble temblors for two hundred years," replied Cymorpagon impatiently. "Oh, I know what the geophysicists say at Prime Center! They say that their stress diagrams and charts of rock movements show that another period of relatively rapid upheaval is imminent. I don't believe it. It is merely a ruse to hasten our departure."

"A ruse? What new fantasy is this?" asked Vervain, lifting one eyebrow. "As the supervisor of the geodyne plant you have had ample opportunity to check the accuracy of the data supplied by Prime Center. Why have you not questioned it until this moment? Why should anyone desire to hasten our departure by a ruse? Your thoughts are in a ferment of strange imaginings."

"I say it is a ruse," insisted Cymorpagon. "This proposal to separate us into a multitude of little colonies scattered over the seas of the world—that also is a ruse."

"That is absurd on the face of it," smiled Vervain. "The multiple-colonies plan was devised by your fellow Tritons and approved by an

overwhelming majority—because you could not agree on any single location."

"Why could we not agree?" demanded Cymorpagon. "Who dares deny that we were swayed by subtle propaganda from Prime Center?"

"Your statements are uniformly more and more incoherent," Vervain commented. "Tell me plainly what you have in mind. What is the true meaning of all these dark hints of ruses and deception and propaganda?"

Cymorpagon inflated his great chest and allowed the air to escape hissingly from the intercostal vents of his gill chamber while he glowered at Vervain.

"The biotechnicians at Prime Center are convinced that the Triton experiment is a fearful blunder," he announced belligerently. "They regret that we were ever created. They fear us, because they have recognized at last that we are a superior race and shall speedily dominate this world—unless we are prevented! When we have been divided, scattered abroad, rendered helpless—then comes the day of reckoning!"

The elders stirred uneasily. Vervain thought:

"Acute psychosis—persecution complex. Wonder how it started. The isolation, probably. He showed a melancholy streak, even as a child. Good thing we're all leaving the Reef soon. Have to persuade him to receive treatment. Going to be difficult."

Aloud, Vervain said:

"It is strange that you alone have discovered these things and that they have been withheld from me. Do you happen to know exactly what will occur on this—day of reckoning?"

"I do. Prime Center will seize upon some convenient fact and declare us a menace to Drylander supremacy. The brain research project of our young Tritons will be the convenient fact. Then we shall be forced to submit to wholesale sterilization and our kind will become extinct in the span of a lifetime."

Abstractedly Vervain laid his hand on the side of the test model beside him, unwittingly pressed an inconspicuous control. The figure trembled, groped with its hands, took one stride forward. Vervain hurriedly halted the motion.

"It has never been my impression, Cymorpagon, that the men and women at Prime Center were particularly concerned about this Drylander supremacy which you mention," said Vervain. "Nor is any

rational human being. Your thoughts have a flavor strongly reminiscent of certain phases of ancient history. Your charges are very disturbing, and I must insist on tangible proof. Can you produce it?"

"I can. It is under lock and seal in the geodyne plant."

"Have you shown it to anyone?"

"He has not," responded several elders with alacrity. "He will not reveal the nature of the evidence nor how he secured it. We realized that a certain hostility toward us might still exist—even though the preponderance of opinion is favorable—but nothing like this, and not from Prime Center. It is incredible. We demand to be shown."

"I would prefer that you first examine the evidence privately," Cymorpagon declared.

"As you wish," agreed Vervain.

VI

The submarine gorge, which was revealed through the triple ports of Vervain's conference hall, was floored with vitrolith overlaid by two centuries' accumulation of coral sand and marine growths. In the air space beneath this false sea bottom lay the geodyne plant, the power heart of Triton Reef. It had pleased the fancy of the builders to support part of the vast load of vitrolith and superincumbent water on five pairs of mighty pillars in the shape of upraised arms, the palms of whose hands were pressed against the ceiling. The pillars were of cloudy, translucent material, vernal green, and glowing with internal light.

In the aisle between these columns stood five squat, fluted towers of dark metal which housed the superstructures of the geodyne converters. Each converter projected a cylindrical space distortion, known as the "guide warp," vertically downward to a depth of about eighteen hundred miles, where it impinged upon the surface of the nickel-iron core of the Earth. A beam of high-frequency compressional space waves—not the transverse waves of stereo—streamed constantly downward along the guide warp and was reflected from the natural warp surrounding the core, whence it abstracted an increment of energy and retraced its path. This increment, coverted into electricity, was sufficient to drive the converters and to deliver an abundant surplus for other uses.

The converters operated noiselessly. There was no sound in the hall of pillars save the silken whisper of circulating air. Vervain, Cymorpagon, and their retinue of elders appeared from behind the farthest converter. Besides it, they were dwarfed to the stature of dolls. Their girdles and sandals flashed with winking stars of emerald fire under the green illumination.

Double, water-tight portals admitted them from the hall of the geodyne converters to the high-ceilinged chamber of the co-ordinating robot which controlled the converters and regulated the flow of air and water through the labyrinthine pools and bulkheaded compartments of the Reef. Cymorpagon's assistants, on duty before the multiple indicator panels, glanced curiously at him and his companions. At the farther side of the robot chamber, Cymorpagon turned to the other elders.

"Wait here," he ordered. "We two shall go on alone."

He stepped upon a square white floor slab. A section of the wall receded, drew aside into a slot, revealed a black opening. As Vervain and Cymorpagon entered, a gentle glow of light replaced the darkness and the door closed behind them.

The light issued from sources sunken in a pool which nearly filled this antechamber of Cymorpagon's living quarters. A flight of steps descended from its brim. On the opposite side of the pool a submerged archway was visible through the green water. The smell of the sea was in the air.

"Now let us see your evidence," requested Vervain.

Cymorpagon whirled upon him with a truculent glare.

"You suspect that I have no evidence to produce!" he exclaimed violently. "It speaks in your eyes, in the tone of your voice! You think me mad! You have always thought me somewhat stupid—you and your Drylander friends! Yes, even my fellow Tritons! That is why I was relegated to this imbecile's task of tending a machine which runs itself!"

"It is worse than I suspected," thought Vervain, but he said:

"You have earned your place in the geodyne plant because others could not fill it so well. Sometimes one suffers from too long and too close an association with one's work. When we have left the Reef—or now, if you choose—you may forget your work until you wish to return to it."

"So! You are hinting at my retirement! You would strip me even of such small honors as I have! You are thinking that I am a product of Tamarac's earlier technique—an abortive creature! I read your unspoken thoughts! I am penalized because of mere physical difference! But you shall see—the whole world shall see! Do you know what I can do?"

"No. Tell me."

Cymorpagon's fury vanished in an instant and was replaced by a confidential manner. He glanced over his shoulder, drew near to Vervain, and spoke eagerly.

"I have carried the theory of the geodyne converter far beyond its previous state. I have discovered totally new possibilities. Suppose the guide warp were projected against a surface of minor discontinuity—say, at a depth of forty miles—and a carrier wave of ten times our present standard frequency were employed. What would happen?"

"You would waste most of the energy. You would pour it into the depths of the Earth. Nothing would happen."

"On the contrary. The high-frequency carrier waves would slowly build up a local increase of magmatic pressure. Eventually a tremendous upthrust would occur, and an earthquake would result. I shall prove it."

"How?"

"One of the converters is operating on a split warp. I made the readjustment secretly. Ten percent of the carrier beam is directed obliquely downward at a point five hundred miles to the northeast and forty miles down. The stresses have been accumulating for five months. The tremors which we have felt have been merely premonitory and the final upthrust is now due at any time. Prime Center is merely pretending to make predictions."

"Amazing! You must show me your calculations. Now, as to this evidence of Prime Center's treachery. We must go over it together, weigh all the facts. Then we can decide what we should do."

Cymorpagon pointed toward the sunken archway.

"I have it in a secret vault. You will see."

"In your sleeping pool? I shall need a helmet."

"Not at all. There is an air space beyond, which I prepared myself. You have only to dive through that portal and swim under water for thirty or forty strokes."

Cymorpagon dived into the pool and drove himself through the archway with a powerful froglike kick. Vervain poised himself for a dive, was suddenly smitten by a formless apprehension, relaxed and retreated a pace. Then he shrugged his shoulders impatiently and dived after Cymorpagon.

The waiting elders strolled restlessly along the aisles between the clicking, humming indicator panels in the chamber of the co-ordinating robot.

"Cymorpagon knows everyone in the crew of the *Tarpon,*" remarked one of the elders. "He always goes aboard when she comes down with supplies. Perhaps he got his information from them."

"That would be mere hearsay, whereas he claims to have tangible evidence," objected another. "Possibly he found some document or recording, packed by mistake in a shipment of personal supplies."

These words were cut short by a jarring concussion and the sound of a muffled *boom*. The lights in the chamber blinked. After a brief, startled silence the elders' voices rose in an agitated babble.

"Was that an earth shock?"

"It sounded like an explosion!"

"Could it be that our children in the Dolphin Pool are resorting to violence?"

Partial verification of this latter surmise arrived almost at once. One of the Triton attendants of the co-ordinating robot, perched before an indicator panel, spoke rapidly into his telephone, saying:

"There is a breach in the Dolphin Pool. The pool pressure is rising rapidly and approaching that of the corresponding sea depth. The emergency locks have tripped on all portals."

An event of even more potent interest now diverted the attention of the elders from this announcement. Vervain had emerged from Cymorpagon's quarters.

The elders looked questioningly at Vervain, and each one felt himself or herself disturbed by an occult unease. It was not the same Vervain.

The source of this disquieting impression was difficult to specify. There was a subtle difference in his gait, his posture, his facial expression. He walked with a suggestion of hesitancy, as if he were not quite sure of the point in space at which his feet would meet the pavement.

His movements were tense, somewhat like the movements of a man balancing on a tight wire. And, contrary to Vervain's usual alert expression, his features were inscrutable—conveyed only a fathomless abstraction.

The elder called Kalamar ventured to ask:

"What did you learn, Pater Vervain?"

Vervain turned his eyes toward Kalamar, but seemed to look through him at some remote object.

"I have learned of man's inhumanity to Tritons," responded Vervain, and the very timbre of his voice was unfamiliar. "I cannot discuss the matter now. I must speak with Prime Center at once."

Kalamar drew in his breath sharply and cried:

"Do you mean . . . that Cymorpagon's charges . . . are the truth?"

"Undeniably," Vervain replied. "I went— Cymorpagon took me to a secret air vault beyond his sleeping pool, and I saw— But we shall speak of that later. I presume that now I shall be granted the use of the stereophone."

As the elders followed Vervain through the hall of the geodyne converters in a stricken silence, Kalamar and one other drifted to the rear.

"My thoughts are sunken a thousand fathoms deep in confusion," declared Kalamar, "but I am puzzled, Nautilus, by one small circumstance."

"What is that?" inquired Nautilus gloomily.

"When Vervain came from Cymorpagon's quarters I observed something which has hitherto escaped me during all the years of our friendship. His neck is encircled by a thin, pale hairline—like the scar of an attempted decapitation, or the brand made by a ring of hot wire."

VII

Since current means of transport had reduced geographical accessibility to the status of a minor factor, Prime Center reared its architectural immensity near the northern border of the one-time Kalahari Desert in South Africa—a region selected because of the local minimum probabilities of earthquake, flood, hurricane, or climatic extremes.

Eight men, the Triton Reef Council, were seated at a horseshoe-shaped table in a subbasement of Prime Center. Their eyes were fixed

expectantly on an object inside the horseshoe—a stereophone receiver like a sundial stand with a luminous face. But no image rose from the disk. Nothing came forth save the voice of Graihalk, the coppery-hued stereophone operator, who was visible at the control board through a glass partition.

"Triton Reef does not answer," reported Graihalk. "Shall I keep on trying? Supervisor Walfram of the S. P. C. base at Samoa is waiting to come in."

"Put him on," directed a dusky counselor with an unmistakable African brogue, "but keep trying for Triton Reef."

The disk erupted a miniature geyser of curdled bluish radiance which resolved itself into the seated, full-sized image of Walfram. Simba, the African biotechnical counselor, and the thronelike stereophone transmitter which he occupied, also flickered with a faint glow. Walfram glittered in tunic and shorts of silver scales; two silver fins, like the pectoral fins of a flying fish, flared on either side of a close-fitting cap of ultramarine blue.

"The first squadron of five transports is at Tahiti and will proceed to Triton Reef when ordered," Walfram announced. "They are prepared to evacuate the Tritons, their personal belongings, and the archives of the Reef. A squadron of freighters for removal of the heavy equipment can get under way within twenty-four hours. Only the ships' captains are aware of the nature of their mission. When do we start?"

"Now," responded Simba. "We are trying to notify Vervain, but for some reason we can't raise Triton Reef on the stereo."

"There is also a small matter of which I have just been informed," continued Walfram. "Pitcairn Island has notified us that the turtle boat *Kelonia,* a small photographic cruiser manned by a couple of S. P. C. protégés, is two days overdue from Easter Island and has not reported her position. Both navigators are young and one of them tends to take long chances, according to her record. Someone at the Andros Travel Bureau seems to suspect that they are interested in the Triton Reef area. Our special Reef supply ship, the *Tarpon,* happens to be in the vicinity and we have ordered her to investigate at once."

"These modern youngsters and their little runabout submersibles!" grumbled Counselor Haldemir, who was also a director of the Transport Corporation. "Just last month one of them crawled out on an

antarctic ice floe, froze down, and we had to send a crew to thaw her loose. Five thousand kilos of calcium chloride! There were three aboard—and they were photographers, also!"

"Triton Reef will be given full publicity very soon," responded Simba, "so its accidental discovery by the *Kelonia* would be of small importance now. Your transport captains may inform their crews. But the vessel may be in distress. It was well to advise the *Tarpon*."

Walfram's image became cloudy and vanished.

"How about Triton Reef, Graihalk?" inquired Simba.

"Triton Reef does not answer," came the reply, "but you have a call from Moongold, your confidential observer in Saigon."

"Let's have it," directed Simba.

"Go ahead, Saigon," said the operator, and another projected likeness appeared before the counselors—the likeness of a fragile, ivory-skinned girl, her inky hair coiled in a dark tower. A garment like a short-sleeved surplice fell from her shoulders, bore a crimson device upon the breast—a dragon encircling the globe of the world.

"I am reporting an undertaking of my colleagues in the regional Research Planning Conference of Lower Asia," musically enunciated Moongold. "By a referendum among forty million qualified adults they are petitioning the assistance of Prime Center in a revival of Tamarac's project to create an aquatic human species. If Prime Center does not see fit to supply them with Tamarac's data, they intend to proceed with an independent local enterprise. In complete ignorance of Triton Reef they have developed an almost identical plan which they intend to carry out on Nightingale Island in the Gulf of Tonkin. To date, the referendum shows an affirmative response of ninety-one percent."

"This practically completes our survey!" exclaimed Counselor Chadayana, otherwise an educational specialist. "By various direct or indirect means we have sounded out the sentiments of the entire population of the world. It is an interesting fact that, with certain reservations, the percent of favorable reactions increases with decreasing ages of the groups under observation. Very young children are unanimously enthralled by the idea of an underwater people."

"You may say that Prime Center will assist the enterprise by whatever means may be necessary," Simba assured Moongold, and her image faded and was gone.

"Now, Graihalk, have you heard any response from Triton Reef?" persisted Simba.

"Triton Reef does not answer," the operator's voice intoned. "There's something not all right at Triton Reef. The stereo plant must be deserted. They have duplicate transmitting and receiving units. If both units go bad at once, they can fall back on radio—

"Hold on, there's something coming through now!" Graihalk interrupted himself. "It's Triton Reef! . . . No . . . The direction is a little off, but it's from that vicinity. Low-power outfit, or an inexperienced operator. Fumbling around. Can't quite adjust his harmonics to our receiving warp. Must be someone in the Reef organization; he wouldn't know the wave pattern of the council beam otherwise. Here it is. See what you can make of it."

The space above the receiving disk boiled with phosphorescent turbulence, in whose depths a shape seemed struggling to take form only to be shattered, like a reflection in rippling water. And a sound came with it, a sound as of an avalanche of broken glass. A voice was trying to make itself heard behind this curtain of noise.

"—fifty-five minutes south, longitude one hundred . . . can you hear—" the voice came fitfully.

"This is the Reef Council operator at Prime Center," responded Graihalk. "We can scarcely hear you. Your beam is entraining deep earth waves. Shift your pattern upscale five or six Angstroms and key down the third harmonic about two percent."

The image steadied and clarified suddenly, revealed Cragstar seated in the *Kelonia's* stereophone transmitter.

Due to the compact construction of the control cabin, the margin of the transmitting field was picking up portions of adjacent gadgets—mechanical fragments which appeared to be suspended in air about Cragstar.

"How am I coming through?" inquired the Triton youth.

"Perfectly now, Cragstar. But where are you?" responded Simba. "Graihalk says you are not at Triton Reef."

"I'm not. I'm aboard the turtle boat *Kelonia,* about eighty miles northwest of Triton Reef—"

His image blurred as if seen through a fog.

"You're fading out," warned Graihalk.

A baffling movement of cloudy shapes took place; then the image clarified again and disclosed Raven.

"I'm taking over for a while," announced Raven. "I know the whims of this transmitter. Cragstar and his companion, Merling, are with us because we picked them up at sea. They tried to swim to Easter Island."

"Fantastic! Why did they do that?" exclaimed Simba.

Raven repeated the information which had been given by the two Tritons.

The counselors listened—incredulously at first, then with indulgent smiles—to this tale of cautious age and innovating youth.

"All this wild alarm is quite pointless," Simba said at last. "We are fully aware of all the implications of the Triton Reef experiment. Of course, the work must go on. Of course, we must face the problem of the brain, but at present we scarcely know enough even to begin. We are laying the groundwork as rapidly as possible, and we shall welcome the enthusiasm and assistance of the young Tritons. But there is no need for haste, and for many years to come we shall be occupied with launching the Tritons as free citizens of the world. You may tell the elders that. No, I shall tell them myself. But wait! Do you know what has happened to the stereo at Triton Reef!"

The heads and shoulders of the two Tritons appeared out of space as they leaned forward into the transmitting field, alongside Raven.

"No! What's wrong with it?" they demanded.

"We can't raise a murmur, and Graihalk has been trying for half an hour."

Cragstar and Merling looked at each other.

"Probably another big row going on," hazarded Merling, "and everyone is there, with Pater Vervain in the middle of it."

The face of Topaz now appeared beside Merling's.

"We ran into a sort of marine gas works about two hundred miles north of here," she announced. "The sea was steaming hot and smelled abominably of hydrogen sulphide and dead fish."

"That is unpleasantly near Triton Reef," said Simba quickly. "Graihalk, call the Geophysical Survey for confirmation."

"What shall we do now?" Topaz inquired.

"Lay your course for Triton Reef," Simba directed. "I would not

have Merling and Cragstar exhaust themselves by further long-distance swimming. Try to contact the Reef by stereo. We shall do likewise. If you succeed, report back."

"We'll photograph it from stem to stern," declared Topaz. "Give us the bearings, Cragstar."

The quadruple image vanished in a whirl of luminescence.

"That accounts for the *Kelonia,*" commented Simba, while the remainder of the council burst into voluble discussion. "Graihalk, notify Walfram to recall the *Tarpon*. And how about the Reef?"

"No luck. Not a sound. But Narhajian of the News Exchange has been clamoring to get in for ten minutes."

"Let him in."

The projection of a swarthy, broad-shouldered individual, draped in am abbreviated black-and-white cape, sprang into visibility.

"How long before you make up your minds?" stormed Narhajian. "When can I release all this stuff about Triton Reef? I tell you, I can't sleep. For years I've been in the Reef organization, keeping my mouth shut and never expecting the story to break during my lifetime. I've turned out all the indirect stuff just as you asked. Now you keep me in suspense for a month! How long does this go on?"

"I am happy to say that you may now release everything," Simba informed him. "You may open the floodgates and let the deluge roll."

Narhajian gaped, speechless for the moment, then grabbed wildly for his transmitter switch and flicked from view.

"Geophysical Survey reports continuous weak Earth tremors from a new focus three hundred miles north of Triton Reef," announced Graihalk; then proclaimed triumphantly:

"Triton Reef coming in strong! Vervain in person!"

The shining emanations of the stereophone disk resolved themselves into Vervain's figure. For a few seconds he sat, hands on knees, and regarded Simba impassively—the picture of monumental immobility. When he spoke, his lips parted but did not otherwise move perceptibly; it was as if the words were uttered through clenched teeth.

"For your information, let me say that our stereo reception is perfect," he began. "Your prior calls were not unnoticed, but for various reasons I did not choose to respond. I must now advise you that whatever preparations have been made for the evacuation of the Reef must be canceled at once."

The counselors stared in amazement.

"Canceled!" ejaculated Simba. "But—everything is in readiness. The time is doubly propitious. As public sentiment is now, we may anticipate severe criticism for not having acted sooner. And even if that were not so, we should be forced to act by a growing danger inherent in the Reef itself. All our data show that in the near future—two months at the most—it will be near the focus of a major volcanic upheaval, a mere recurrence of forces which have never fully subsided. You know that as well as we."

"I do not know it. On the contrary, I know that these are purely fictitious statements which mask a sinister purpose. Moreover, there is a faction among us—among the young Tritons—which is not yet prepared for freedom. They are self-willed and incorrigible."

"What alien thoughts are these? They are not the thoughts of Vervain," murmured the other counselors.

"These incorrigibles whom you mention—I have spoken with two of them," remarked Simba. "They are behaving quite normally. The mind of youth has teemed always with magnificent schemes. Your alarm is ridiculous."

"You spoke with them?" The voice was charged with anger and astonishment, but Vervain's features betrayed no emotion. "How can that be? The rebels imprisoned themselves in the Dolphin Pool, and within the hour, by means not yet determined, blasted open and escaped through the effluent water duct."

"I salute them!" cried Counselor Chadayana.

"The two in question escaped earlier," explained Simba, "and were picked up by a submersible cruiser. But what is this . . . this sinister purpose of which we are accused?"

"You need not pretend ignorance. I know that you foreseen a world dominated by Tritons and have conceived an ingenious method for our extinction. Your fears are by no means unfounded. It is my intention that the world *shall* be dominated by Tritons, and in turn I shall dominate them!"

Counselor Haldemir exchanged glances with his fellows, and his lips formed the word, *"Insanity!"* He seized the individual telephone before him on the council table and spoke softly but emphatically. Since Simba alone was visible in the Triton Reef receiver, this action was unperceived there.

"Are you not being inconsistent?" inquired Simba persuasively. "You condemn these so-called rebels for their ambitious scheme—their at present impossibly ambitious scheme—of producing a superior race because you fear that it will create antagonism toward the Tritons, and therefore demand that the Tritons continue in their confinement to the Reef. In the next breath you declare that the Tritons *are* a superior race, and reveal an ambition—worthy of a twentieth-century dictator—which will rouse a veritable storm of opposition, and—if it is to be realized—necessarily involves world-wide freedom of movement for every Triton."

"I am capable of handling the situation in my own fashion," was the haughty reply. "The world shall learn to fear its new masters. I have learned that—Cymorpagon has discovered means whereby our geodyne converters can become agents of destruction. You shall have a demonstration very shortly. This volcanic upheaval which you predict—it is true that it will occur, but our converters will be the power behind it and the focus will not be at Triton Reef—unless I so decide. The focus will be eastward of the Reef. The ocean bottom will rise, and the Chilean coast will sink into the sea. Then the world will listen to our terms; if it does not, there shall be further catastrophes. If you attempt to hinder me by force, I shall destroy the Reef."

"Complete mental collapse! Horrible!" whispered the counselors.

"Let us speak with Cymorpagon," requested Simba. "Bring him to the stereophone."

"I am not disposed to be annoyed further by your communications," was the response, "so I am taking steps to make them impossible."

The image leaned forward, reached for an object outside the transmitting field. The right hand and arm disappeared, truncated at the elbow, then reappeared. The hand grasped a device not unlike a pneumatic receiver.

"This is a diatrode gun," Vervain's likeness informed the counselors. "A reconstruction of an old weapon which your educational department was kind enough to furnish our history students, together with similar material. They have difficulty in appreciating the realities of warfare. It emits controlled discharges of globular electricity along a guide parth of ionized air. Like this."

He leveled the weapon—actually at the control panel of his transmitter but seemingly at one end of the council table. Several counselors

crouched involuntarily. A hissing, spectral blue sphere emerged from the muzzle, clung for a moment, grew like an expanding bubble, elongated into an ellipsoid, sprang free—

The image was disrupted in a splash of color, emitted a huge discord as from the shattering of a giant harp.

"It is evident that we have now to deal with a madman," Simba said rapidly. "A madman who harbors ideas of destruction, who has possession of at least one deadly weapon, who may have already committed we know not what acts of violence and who may commit others. He has destroyed the means of communication. We must gain control of the Triton Reef situation by the speediest possible means. The submersible squadron at Tahiti is not very fast—"

"Yes, yes! I'm ahead of you!" interrupted Haldemir. "Three days and a half at full speed. So I called the liner *Capricorn*. She's due over Rio in thirty minutes. Told her to stand by at altitude forty kilometers to take on whatever men and equipment we decided upon, the divert course to Triton Reef and drop to sea level. I gave her the bearings. We'll take off the whole Triton population at one swoop and bring Vervain back in a specimen bottle. Captain—highly indignant. Never heard of Triton Reef and doesn't want to come down to sea level ahead of schedule. It seems she was about to hang up some kind of a record."

"Excellent!" approved Simba. "And now as to Vervain, poor fellow. He may prove a difficult problem. We must handle him with as little turmoil as possible. Probably he has stirred up too much already. My first thought is of lethegen—lethegen for Vervain."

VIII

Another vessel, much smaller than the *Capricorn* and flying from the northwest at a lower level, was also bearing down on Triton Reef. She was the News Exchange air cruiser *NE-6-137*, hurriedly diverted in mid-ocean from another assignment by the Communications Corp. Like the *Capricorn* she rode upon a mobile space warp, somewhat as a surfboard rides the crest of a roller: Her passage split the protesting air with a sustained and mournful wail. She drove high above a surging sea of fog, blinding white under the early afternoon sun. Her nimble shadow, edged with a rainbow band, pursued her across the fog floor like a racing porpoise.

The *NE-6-137* had established radio contact with the *Kelonia*—surface cruising somewhere under the fog—and was now reducing speed as she rapidly overhauled the submersible. Both captain and pilot were intent upon the direction finder.

"We'll be over her in a minute," said the pilot. "She reported that the fog is rising."

"So?" responded the captain. "Knock it down with the precipitator and we'll look for her."

The pilot pressed a foot treadle. The fog pavement under the air cruiser sagged as if undermined, and a circular pit extended downward until it revealed the gray-green, wave-crinkled sea at the bottom, still foaming from the torrent of rain which had fallen into it. The pit advanced with the motion of the cruiser.

"I'm not quite clear as to what we're going after," remarked the pilot as the craft sank into the hole she had drilled. "Something about an uncharted reef—people under the sea. What's it all about?"

"It seems that Prime Center and S. P. C. have had some sort of biological experiment under way and kept it dark for an unbelievably long time," replied the captain. "Now they're ready to broadcast it. This seagoing soup tureen, the *Kelonia,* is mixed up in it and therefore she becomes news."

"There she is now!" exclaimed the pilot.

The fog swirled in and closed above the *NE-6-137* as she descended, and now she floated only two hundred feet above the heaving, slate-gray sea at the center of a charmed circle, holding the fog at bay with her precipitators. Beneath her was a wave-tossed object resembling a silver dish cover surmounted by a deformed thimble—the conning tower and upper hull of the *Kelonia.* The latter craft was already the target of three televisors trained upon her from observation hatches along the keel of the *NE-6-137.* The operators of these instruments, unlike the captain and pilot, had had more time for perusal and study of the preliminary Triton Reef data with which Narhajian and his staff were feverishly bombarding the world. Consequently they were more or less prepared for what they saw.

The observation hatches were shielded by inverted, retractible domes of silicoid wherein the operators and their instruments were suspended in gimbals. A narrator centered the cross hairs of her televisor field on the *Kelonia's* conning tower and addressed a far-flung audience:

"The splashes of foam around the *Kelonia* seem to be made by a numerous company of swimming creatures. At the moment we cannot identify them. We doubt that they are Tritons, since the *Kelonia* informed us—as you may have heard—that she has only two aboard. These may be porpoises or a herd of seals. No! They must be Tritons! Perhaps you caught the movement of a swimmer's arm, briefly lifted from the water. Mark the three clambering out upon the *Kelonia's* deck. They are definitely Tritons! We do not know what this may signify. Why have these other Tritons come out to meet the *Kelonia?* Her radio has become silent."

On the bridge of the *NE-6-137* the captain hurriedly leveled his binoculars at the *Kelonia* and stared tensely.

"What's this thing crawling out on deck?" he demanded. "It—he—no, it's a girl—she's black as the ace of spades—or is she purple? Here's two more coming! Are these Tritons? I expected some sort of scaly thing with fins. Why, they're practically human, and not bad-looking! Something queer about their hair—seems to be squirming all the time. And if I'm not delirious, they have feelers like confounded giant mosquitoes! They sprouted out suddenly on their foreheads!"

"Either you're not delirious, or both of us are," responded the pilot. "I see the same thing. Can they live out of water? Look at that!"

This concluding exclamation was inspired by the spectacular jets of water and vapor which the three Tritons expelled from their lateral gill orifices.

The News Exchange vessel descended until the domes of the observation hatches barely cleared the wave crests. Heads were protruded from portholes and a robust voice cried, "What! No mermaids?" The captain stepped out on the narrow bridge deck just as the conning-tower hatch of the *Kelonia* was thrown open and Raven emerged therefrom, followed by Cragstar.

"Are these people Tritons?" inquired the captain, leaning over the rail and addressing Raven. His burning curiosity made mere radio contact seem inadequate.

"Yes," replied one of the three Triton maidens on the *Kelonia's* deck. "Are you disappointed?"

"They can talk!" exclaimed the robust voice.

"We understood that you had only two aboard," continued the captain. "Where did you pick up all these others?"

The *Kelonia* was completely encircled by a fringe of Tritons who had drawn near to listen and now clung to her sides.

"They shut themselves up somewhere in Triton Reef and then blasted a way out," replied Raven. "Prime Center told us to go on to the Reef; then they recalled their instructions and told us to wait. They say it isn't safe. Vervain, the man in charge, is out of his head and running around with some kind of weapon. Prime Center sent us a transcription of what Vervain said to the Reef Council, and we made a photographic retranscription. We've been circling around, five miles from the Reef, waiting for the *Capricorn* as per instructions. Then these others found us. It was then that we stopped sending. They hadn't eaten very much for a couple of days, and we fed them. Then we told them about Vervain and they wouldn't believe it. Five of them are down below now—came in through the air lock—watching our retranscription being run through the projector. Are you going on to Triton Reef? What are you going to do about Vervain?"

"We're going on to Triton Reef, but Vervain is not my problem," replied the captain. "I heard something about his blowing up the stereo plant. We took on some stereo experts from another ship who have orders to repair the damage. I hadn't heard about Vervain's weapon. That may put a crimp in our plans until the *Capricorn* arrives. In the meantime I would advise you to stay put and wait for the *Capricorn*."

"Vervain, or the elders, or both, may refuse to admit you to the Reef," remarked Cragstar.

"We'll consider that difficulty when it arises," responded the captain. "If your Triton friends are agreeable, we'll take them aboard and they can make their radio debut while we haul them back to their Reef."

As a result of this invitation the *NE-6-137* was invaded by a Triton boarding party which speedily disrupted the ship's discipline. She hove to in midair while the captain granted the crew temporary leave to abandon posts which they had already deserted. A tumultuous mob surged into the ship's broadcasting cabins bearing Tritons on their shoulders. On the dark side of the world, sleepers were roused by telephone chimes, listened to the somewhat incoherent words of friends, spent the remainder of the night before their stereoscopic telescreens. Commentators waxed lyrical and metaphysical, hailed the Tritons as "the vanguard of a new epoch," described them as "another eye through which the human mind may see the Universe in a new light, another

brain wherewith Man may appreciate and admire." So hectic a broadcast had not agitated the world since the return of the first warp-driven space cruisers, bearing a slab of Martian hieroglyphics.

"Here we are, left in the lurch," grumbled Topaz disgustedly as she listened in the control cabin of the *Kelonia* to the broadcast from the *NE-6-137*. "Merling and Cragstar and the others are going on to Triton Reef, while we potter around here and wait for the *Capricorn*. By the time she arrives, all the excitement will be over."

"Our instructions are to wait," admonished Raven.

"Prime Center didn't suppose that the News Exchange would have a ship down here this soon," Topaz asserted. "They just said, 'Wait,' and forgot about us. I'm taking the helm."

So while the *NE-6-137* floated aloft and the images of affable but astonished young Tritons flashed across the telescreens of the world, the *Kelonia* traversed the short remaining distance to Triton Reef. The warning clang of an obstacle monitor on her port bow brought her to an abrupt halt. The booming concussions of surf were plainly audible. The navigators peered through the forward port.

Five hundred feet ahead a phalanx of ugly crags—jagged, sea-battered fangs of black granite—loomed through the thinning fog. Tumbling torrents of foam streamed from their fissures. One grotesque rock formation, pierced by an eyelike cavern, roughly simulated a colossal rhinoceros' head.

"This is the place; Cragstar laid a true course," remarked Raven, consulting scribbled pages of notes on the navigator's desk beside the calculator. "He says, 'Depth at Rhinoceros Rock, sixteen fathoms, increasing seaward. Tunnel under the Rock brings you to portal of submersible docks. Smooth bottom; crawl in; don't try to make it free-floating. Tunnel full of bad currents. Nautilus has short-range radio. Should respond if Vervain has not wrecked that also.' "

"Very well; we shall crawl," said Topaz, and the *Kelonia* slanted downward, spouting fountains of bubbles in the glare of her bow floodlight. She found a smooth, dark bottom which rang with metallic resonance under her caterpillar treads. Before her, the floodlight revealed the stark, angular buttresses of a black cliff, sparkling with prisms of silica. At its base yawned a huge semicircular tunnel mouth into which the *Kelonia* crept crunchingly, like a metal snail entering a culvert. This passage debouched onto the floor of an oblong lagoon from

which no means of exit was apparent. The *Kelonia* halted before a sheer, unbroken wall of granite.

"Dead-looking place," commented Topaz. "Where's the portal? See what you can raise on the radio."

"Someone has spotted us, I think," responded Raven, looking upward through the forward port. Three dots of pale-green light had appeared halfway up the face of the granite wall. Even as Raven moved toward the radiophone panel, the telescreen glowed and the harassed countenance of Nautilus appeared.

"Ahoy there, you in the turtle boat! Who are you? What do you want?" inquired the Triton apprehensively.

Raven clicked the radio transmission switch.

"This is Raven, aboard the *Kelonia,*" he replied. "We hope to make pictures of the Reef. There's a News Exchange air cruiser a few miles behind us, bringing repairs for your stereo plant which Vervain crippled."

"We are listening to her broadcast now," responded Nautilus. "It's the most confusing thing I ever heard! What are we to believe? Cymorpagon says that Prime Center has deceived us; Vervain denies it. Then Vervain agrees with him, acts like a man in a dream. Next, Cymorpagon vanishes. We have searched his quarters and every corner of the Reef, but he is nowhere. Now comes this NE cruiser, which picks up our young rebels, and they broadcast everything! If what Cymorpagon feared were true, the world should rise against them. But what happens? They are received in a whirlwind of acclaim! Vervain is angered by the broadcast—says this seeming good will is insincere—a trick to mislead us until we are scattered abroad and far from our haven in the Reef. And what is this talk of his destruction of the stereo plant? He claims that it was wrecked by Prime Center with some sort of long-range blast, in an attempt on his life."

"Nonsense!" retorted Raven. "He did it himself with a kind of gun. Was there no one with him when he spoke to Prime Center?"

"He insisted on being alone in the stereo plant. He locked himself in. It is true that he has a weapon and is patrolling the Reef with it. The NE broadcast called him insane. How can that be? He was ever the most rational of men, and yet—"

"Hang on a moment and we'll show you something," interrupted

Raven. "We have a transcription of Vervain's interview with the Reef Council. Topaz, go below and bring the cartridge."

The "cartridge" was an optical by-product of the ever-expanding science of warp mechanics which had long since superseded the reel of film. When this manifesto of Triton dictatorship had been duly transmitted, Nautilus exclaimed:

"Incredible! We must discuss this with you in person! Stand by as you are while I open the portal. It lies dead ahead of you."

Raven and Topaz pressed their faces against the forward port and stared at the wall of granite.

"What's happening?" Raven ejaculated. "The ship's rising!"

"It isn't!" contradicted Topaz. "The cliff is moving. A piece of it is sliding down."

A great arched crevice had opened in the face of the cliff and the inclosed segment was descending smoothly, to the accompaniment of a powerful mechanical drone. A green-lighted space came into view beyond; the huge gate disappeared into its slot—a gaping chasm—which in turn disappeared with a *clank* as its cover slid into place.

"Now go ahead," called Nautilus.

The depths beyond the portal were so brightly lit that Topaz extinguished the floodlight. Directed by the radio voice of Nautilus, the craft broke surface in a rectangular basin under an echoing, vaulted roof. The mellow submerged lighting painted the roof with writhing ripple shadows. Metal-bound packing cases were piled on granite quays which projected into the basin. Two submersible freighters rode at their moorings.

Nautilus' voice broke off in mid-sentence and his image vanished from the screen, which nevertheless continued to glow.

"What's happened? Now you see him, now you don't," complained Topaz. "No one in sight to throw us a line, either."

Raven threw back the conning-tower hatch just as a door slid open halfway down the line of wharves, emitted a white glare, disgorged a highly vocal throng. The voices echoed clamorously under the vault of the roof. Various small-wheeled mechanisms were trundled out of the door. Raven was dazzled by a glaring round eye of light which was turned upon him. There were shouts of "Ahoy, *Kelonial*" Several Tritons detached themselves from the crowd, dived into the pool and

swam swiftly toward the submersible, churning up clouds of luminous foam. The stentorian tones of Nautilus issued from a group which had run out on one of the nearer wharves. Under his eye the *Kelonia* nosed into her berth and was made fast. The swimming Tritons, led by Merling and Cragstar, bounded onto the *Kelonia's* deck, splashing and spouting. They dragged Raven and Topaz from the conning tower, laughed at their amazement, deposited them of the wharf. A vociferous pack of News Exchange narrators and interlocutors immediately laid hands upon them, ringed them with mobile floodlights, televisors, microphones.

"How did you all get here?" marveled Raven.

"The NE ship landed up above; there's a way in from the topside," explained Merling.

"In Triton Reef you behold one of the engineering achievements of the age," declaimed a tall young man wearing the black-and-white cape of the News Exchange. "You must realize that all this huge chamber is the hollow interior of an artificial island."

He gestured expansively, while obedient light beams and televisors followed his gesture.

"Externally it appears to be no more than a barren peak of naked granite," he continued. "Yet when we landed on its summit, Cragstar had only to touch the rocks with a little instrument which he carries and they opened up like Aladdin's cave, disclosing an elevator ready to take us down."

Penetrating feminine accents floated over the heads of the crowd.

"Show us this unfortunate transmitter which was so foolishly demolished," requested the voice. "We must see it in order to know what is needed."

"The transmitter! The one that Vervain wrecked!" exclaimed Topaz. "We must see that. We might get pictures of Vervain."

"I fear that you must be advised not to approach the stereo plant," warned the tall young man. "A diatrode gun in irresponsible hands is not a hazard to which anyone should be needlessly exposed. For the present you are the subject, not the maker, of pictures. Let us first have your story."

"What story?" protested Raven. "We make animated murals, and we're looking for material."

The tall young man opened his mouth to reply, but was silenced by

a crackling, rending din like the first crash of a summer thunderstorm. The wharf heaved underfoot, a floodlight toppled over, the lights in the pool went out, several people were thrown off their feet. A line of miniature whitecaps raced across the pool out of the sudden darkness into the zone of the floodlights. The rending noise faded into a prolonged, sullen grinding, and ceased.

"Another earthshock!" muttered Cragstar. "Any time, however short, that we remain on Triton Reef will be too long!"

IX

Cragstar and the stereo maintenance crew were hurtled from the submersible docks to the anteroom of Vervain's quarters in an air-tight, bullet-shaped car through a hydraulic tube of mirror smoothness. At the end of its flight the car passed through an air lock. After releasing himself from his deep-cushioned seat, mounted on recoil plungers, Cragstar turned and addressed Aldarbrook, who was in charge of the maintenance crew.

"You haven't reconsidered?" he inquired dubiously. "You still think it advisable to make this direct request to Vervain?"

Aldarbrook opened the carrying case at her feet, removed and donned a headband bearing pivoted earphones and stroboscopic eyepieces.

"I shall approach him as if he were sane," declared Aldarbrook, "and ask his permission to repair the transmitter. Since we can't get into the stereo plant without passing through Vervain's rooms, and since he is said to be there now, we should be forced to use some subterfuge if we don't tell him our real intentions. Very probably he would see through any pretext; our equipment tells plainly enough why we're here. Then he would be angry, and an angry maniac with a weapon would be a real obstacle. This way, I may gain his consent. A blunt refusal is the worst I expect. In that case we shall await the *Capricorn*."

"I hope it works," remarked Cragstar as he opened the door of the car. He stooped and went out, followed by Aldarbrook and her crew.

"Great triple skew-torques! What's this?" cried Aldarbrook, stopping short on the threshold of Vervain's conference hall. The Dolphin Pool circuit had been restored and the place was now filled with light.

"This is Vervain's collection of anatomical models. Do you find them astonishing?" responded Cragstar. "You see, there are several ways of

studying anatomy. Dissection is one way. The making of accurate structural duplicates is another. Some of these are orthodox human models, some are Tritons—students' work. The others represent creatures which do not yet exist—which may never exist."

"Marvelous! When the News Exchange narrators see this they'll all float away in a cloud of adjectives. Where's Vervain? I thought he was here."

At opposite ends of the chamber the green uniformity of the walls was broken by patterns like great targets—a ring of peacock blue, white ring, blue bull's-eye. The insignia of Submarine Products Corp. —the crown and trident—appeared in each bull's-eye, embossed in white metal. Cragstar indicated these twin objects. Short flights of steps led up to them.

"He may be in there, in the stereo room," said Cragstar, "or in the laboratory."

The outer ring of the door at which he pointed began to revolve as he spoke. The entire circular panel receded rapidly into the wall like the breech block of a huge gun, in reverse, exposing a burnished threaded casing and a lateral opening. A Triton hurried forth from this opening.

"Kalamar!" Cragstar called. "Where is Vervain?"

"In the culture room," replied Kalamar. "He is making a pretense of working. It is pitiful, like the make-believe of a child. He has forgotten almost everything. Already he has destroyed two gene cultures which cost him days of labor to isolate. Who are these people?"

"We're from Communications Central," replied Aldarbrook. "Can we get into the stereo room?"

"No, it is locked and Vervain has the key. He also has his weapon. I cannot persuade him to relinquish it."

"There you have it, Cragstar. We must see Vervain first."

So, ignoring the protests of the two Tritons, Aldarbrook invaded Vervain's laboratory and preceded them by way of double-insulated doors into the humid darkness of the culture room. A hooded crimson light cast a fiery glow on Vervain's impassive features, on his hands, and on the small apparatus with which he was busied—a Mephistophelean monochrome floating in blackness. Beyond him a shadowy multitude of glass ampules, tier above tier, threw back dusky-red gleams where the bloody radiance lay along their curved sides.

"What a hothouse! *Ugh!*" muttered Aldarbrook. "And the fumes! How can he stand it?"

All three began to cough and choke.

"What are you doing now, Pater Vervain?" inquired Kalamar between gasps.

"I am boiling some water," replied Vervain, slowly raising his head. Before him a little glass cup reposed upon a tripod, glowing like a ruby; it contained a clear, furiously bubbling liquid into which he had inserted a miniature immersion heater.

"But it is not water, Pater Vervain!" protested Kalamar in strangled tones. "It is chloroform!"

"Chloroform?" repeated Vervain with a rising inflection but a countenance of wood. "How do you know that? It looks like water."

"By the odor, the fumes! You will asphyxiate yourself!"

"The odor? Of course. I am stupid."

Vervain removed the heater from the cup with his right hand and transferred it to his left while he reached for the switch. The hot metal sizzled in his grasp. The three onlookers cried out. Vervain deliberately hung the heater in its rack and nonchalantly examined his burned hand—which still exhaled tendrils of vapor. Then he realized tardily that he had heard an outcry from voices other than Kalamar's. He groped beneath the worktable, came up with the diatrode gun.

"There are others with you, Kalamar! Who are they?"

The voice was threatening, but only his mouth moved—a mere parting of the lips. Aldarbrook experienced an eerie sensation of the scalp and spine. She moved forward into the ruddy light, followed by Cragstar.

"I am from Communications Central," Aldarbrook informed Vervain. "We felt that we should consult you before beginning work on the stereo transmitter."

"So you should," agreed Vervain, lowering the gun a trifle, "inasmuch as I have the key."

"Without the stereo you are voiceless, a prisoner in Triton Reef," continued Aldarbrook. "Is *that* your ideal for the future leader of a world empire?"

"The earthquake shall be my voice," declared Vervain, flourishing the gun. "When five hundred miles of South American coast founders in the sea, it will be time for me to speak."

"Prime Center will call it a natural catastrophe," argued Aldarbrook. "How will you deny it? We must begin now. And this little weapon of yours—is it exactly suitable for one who wields earthquakes?"

"There is something in what you say," conceded Vervain thoughtfully, resting the gun on the worktable.

"With the stereo, you might have a direct beam connection with Central," Aldarbrook went on. "The whole world could hear your commands, see your face. Of course, if you care to appear before it carrying a mere copy of a weapon two thousand years old, that's your affair."

Vervain laid the diatrode gun on the worktable, folded his arms, and appeared to meditate.

The door of the culture room opened a few inches, the silhouette of a head appeared in the opening, and a narrow beam of light played over the group at the worktable. The head and the beam withdrew quickly, and before the door closed again the owner of the head addressed some second person in a loud whisper:

"It's Vervain! In there! Get everyone out of here!"

"Who was that?" exclaimed Vervain, seizing the gun and wheeling toward the door. He collided with some object which toppled over with a crash of glassware, then strode into the laboratory with the others at his heels. He entered just in time to see the flutter of a black-and-white cape as it vanished into the passage leading to the conference hall. Treading with elephantine heaviness, he pursued it gun in hand.

One of Aldarbrook's crew came forth from a temporary retreat behind a reagent case, spoke tersely as they ran after Vervain:

"We tried to open the door of the stereo room. Squad of broadcasters came in another way—not by the tube. All over the place before we knew. Someone told them—Vervain—on the other side of the Reef. Doubted he was here. Two of them came in to look."

When Vervain appeared on the stairs leading to the laboratory, two mobile televisors were already retreating from the hall on noiseless wheels, in reverse, toward the portal whence they had come. Their operators continued to broadcast, undaunted, as they retreated. A third televisor in the other end of the chamber was still engaged in a sort of Cook's Tour of Vervain's anatomical exhibits; the two scouts who had discovered Vervain in the culture room were sprinting toward it. The remainder of Aldarbrook's crew were at the foot of the steps, which they had just commenced to ascend.

Vervain shouted "Halt!" in a voice of tremendous volume. A shouting mask could have been little more startling. The operator of the third televisor glanced over his shoulder, deftly swerved into the convenient haven of the anteroom doorway. Here he did an about-face and trained the instrument on Vervain.

"In order to dispel any doubts which you may harbor as to my intended use of this weapon," boomed Vervain, "I shall give you a demonstration. After that, you may have thirty seconds for your departure. You may take the body with you."

He leveled the gun at the televisor operator in the anteroom door and discharged a globe of humming blue fire. If he had been more versed in historical knowledge, he would have known that the slow missiles of the diatrode gun were intended primarily for use against stationary electrical war machines, not human beings or other moving targets. Also he would have known that the trigger should have been depressed until the globe found its mark, since the ionizing guide-ray was thereby maintained. As it was, the globe drifted leisurely across the chamber, hesitated above an unfinished, one-armed manikin with closed eyes and the serene expression of a Buddha, and drifted down upon its head.

The globe pirouetted, enveloped the head with a ghostly nimbus, vanished as if absorbed. The figure was convulsed. It threw aloft its one arm, reeled over sideways, flung itself about the floor like a decapitated chicken, rolled to the foot of the laboratory stairs as Cragstar and the others appeared behind Vervain. There it threshed its limbs in a final spasm, its eyes and mouth flew open, and it lay motionless and staring.

"Revolting!" shuddered Aldarbrook.

"It was not alive," soothed Cragstar, "but very cunningly made, down to the minutest muscles."

Kalamar stepped to Vervain's side, laid a hand on his arm, spoke a few quiet words. Vervain peered closely at an indicator on the gun butt and announced:

"I have one shot left. I must recharge. I advise no one to stand in my way."

The operator of the third televisor—although poised for a leap—had not left the saddle of his machine. Consequently all three lenses followed Vervain's stiff march down the conference hall to the door of the stereo room. Half a billion watchers of the telescreens, on Earth and

elsewhere, relaxed briefly. As Vervain mounted the steps he stumbled, struck one knee against the edge of a step with a sickening crack. It seemed a crippling blow, yet he rose awkwardly, mounted the remaining steps without difficulty.

"The man seems invulnerable!" breathed Aldarbrook.

Kalamar was regarding the hand which he had laid on Vervain's arm, his eyes wide with the dawn of a fantastic surmise.

"Invulnerable?" whispered Kalamar. "Is he even human?"

x

A rotary portal opened at the base of an obsidian bluff and Merling came forth, followed by Raven and Topaz.

"This is Sea Horse Pool," said Merling. "Here we are below sea level, under water, and above water at the same time."

They stood ankle-deep in a turf of dense green mossy growth bordering a beach of white coral sand and shell fragments. The beach sloped down to an irregular lagoon, half a mile across, still greater in length, ringed by the obsidian bluffs. The waters were a placid sheet of light, illumined from below, disturbed only by the bubbling of aërating jets. And above—not sky, but a roof of steel and silicoid, arched and groined, supported by a rank of mighty pillars which rose from the green-lit depths. And surging above the glassy roof—surf and green water! A broad shelf around each pillar at lagoon-level gave root-hold to luxuriant thickets of broad-leaved plants and blue-flowered giant creepers which climbed the columns ivy-fashion.

"They must be growing in a salt-water soil," remarked Raven, eying these growths. "Did your biotechnicians make them also?"

"Yes. These, and many things which grow down under," Merling responded.

"Where are the children?" Topaz inquired.

"Somewhere below. It is strange that none of them are on the beach. It is their free time— They come now!"

A swarm of glistening black bodies rose rocketlike from the depths, broke surface noisily, drove toward the beach with the speed of otters, leaving wakes of foam.

"All these are between fifteen and eight years of age," explained Merling. "Those younger have a pool of their own, with closer supervision."

The Triton children leaped upon the beach in a shower of spray and hissing water jets, became vocal when they had emptied their gill chambers.

"Old Eight-Arms! Dacna saw him fall in last night, when the roof cracked in the quake and the sea leaked in!"

"We looked after they fixed the roof and we couldn't find him! We thought Dacna saw a bunch of kelp!"

"An octopus?" exclaimed Merling. "In the pool? Have you seen it?"

"Yes! At the deep end, among the tall cup sponges!"

"He was floating near the bottom. We thought he was dead."

"Murex pinched him and he squirmed!"

"He swims slowly. He is hurt."

"Is everyone out of the pool?" Merling asked.

"No. Some are asleep in the forest. Dacna went to tell them."

"You had best go to your homes until the pool is searched," advised Merling. "Who is pool warden?"

"Dacna is first; I'm second warden," announced Murex. "I'll telephone Pater Vervain from my home—" He checked himself, clearly distressed. "But I can't. I'll call Kalamar."

Raven and Topaz exchanged significant glances.

"It's a take!" declared Raven. "We can do this. How big is this octopus?"

"A monster! His arms are—so long."

Murex made two furrows in the sand with his toe, indicating a length of about five feet.

"That isn't very big," Topaz commented. "We've killed bigger ones than that around the Antilles. You may do it this time, Raven. I'll shoot the pictures."

"What are you intending?" demanded Merling.

"You needn't send for your official exterminators—which I suppose is what you're about to do," answered Raven. "We'd rather do the deed —and record it in pictures. Our warp armor is protection enough. Just show us the place."

The device traditionally known as armor was in fact a one-piece, hooded diving suit of flexible alloy mesh embedded in pliant, transparent material. A zipper extended from the jointed metal belt to a locking attachment on the forehead, under the light disk. The suit was equipped with a voice stereophone and an aerophore—whose "gill

pump" was driven by a vortex motor the size of a man's thumb—both mounted in a boxlike knapsack. Raven and Topaz had returned to the *Kelonia* and donned garments of this nature after finding that they could not accompany Aldarbrook. Up to the time of their descent into Sea Horse Pool the zippers of the suits were partially open and the hoods thrown back.

Curiosity as to the means whereby the obviously unarmed Raven proposed to dispatch an octopus, together with his equally obvious unconcern, led Merling to consent to the attempt.

"We have done it with a pair of pliers," Raven observed with intentional vagueness, "but I'd rather use my gloves."

When the zippers of the suits were closed and locked, the locking activated a warp-generating apparatus in the belt. Both suits were instantly incased in a third-order space warp whose presence was not evident until the wearers were submerged, whereupon it could be seen that they were enveloped in a film of air—a bubble sheath whose surface maintained an invariable distance from the alloy mesh. It conformed faithfully to the movements and flexures of the latter, rigidly resisted pressure and impact from without, and was almost frictionless —a paradoxical combination of properties which only the mathematics of warp mechanics could reconcile. The vents of the aerophore and steel corrugations on the palms of the gloves and the soles of the boots projected through this super-slippery warp surface. A movie camera the size of a large watch was mounted crosswise on the left wrist of the garment; its cartridge had a capacity equivalent to eight hundred feet of film.

Merling led the way into the lagoon, wading a broad shallow which ended in a drop of four fathoms. Raven and Topaz joined hands and stepped off after Merling, who swam downward with the suppleness of a seal. There was more light beneath the surface than above; they seemed not to be sinking through water but through a luminous green atmosphere in a swirl of quicksilver. They alighted on a floor of white sand among the lavender domes of brain corals. Before them a meadow of fern-fronded algæ sloped into glowing green profundities. The fronds bowed with lazily rippling unanimity before a gentle current.

The two air-sheathed figures, veiled in gray metallic gauze, plodded into the lower reaches of the gorge which traversed the center of the

pool, while Merling looped and circled before them. She led them into the verdant dimness of an algal forest—towering spires tufted with olive-green bristles. Giant fawn-colored sea horses, russet-flecked, drifted through the foliage.

In a clearing where flower-headed marine worms grew among man-high sponges—bulging goblets of maroon velvet—Merling held up eight fingers, pointed among the bases of a sponge cluster.

An inert brick-red tentacle, splotched with dull gray, lay across their path. Raven stooped, seized it, brought the feebly writhing octopus from its retreat with a vigorous jerk, inspected the bulbous body.

"Bad wound," grunted Raven into his stereophone. "Must have been injured when it fell in."

"That half-dead thing! I wouldn't waste any part of a cartridge on it," said Topaz scornfully.

Raven bestrode the mottled body, interlaced the fingers of his corrugated gloves, made a steel-ridged vise of his hands. He pinched up a fold of octopus skin in the jaws of that vise, between the creature's eyes, made sure of the presence of a hard kernel-like body within the fold of skin, then squeezed his hands together. There was a sharp snap like the cracking of a nut, and the octopus gave a final twitch and was still.

"Cracked the big ganglion," concluded Raven. "That finishes it."

Merling swooped before them agitatedly, pointed into the algal forest, held up eight fingers.

"What! Another? Warden Dacna missed one," was Raven's comment. "Perhaps they fell in together."

This second cephalapod half floated, half walked from its leafy concealment, malevolently alive and in the full fury of its living colors. The word "fury" is used advisedly. Its arms—which subsequent measurement proved to be seven feet in length—flamed with a scarcely describable hue, an unearthly hybrid color between vivid salmon-pink and burning orange, with an overtone of blue. They were dappled with a black which somehow surpassed black—a blackness infused with an obscure vibration of color. The suction disks were cups of ivory. On the swollen body the color scheme was reversed—black dappled with flame. Its eyes were disks of moonstone.

Merling retired to a discreet distance.

"Beautiful!" breathed Topaz, intently squinting through her object

finger. "I'm sorry we have to kill it. Wish we had a better light. My headlight—that will brighten things up a bit. Don't rush things, Raven. Creep up on it. Crouch. That's it! Wonderful! Two wrestlers—man and octopus—feinting for the first hold! You've got the idea. Bother! It won't wait!"

The octopus was in no mood to embellish its performance with the artistic niceties of feint and parry as conceived by Topaz. Under the beam of her light disk it reared up on its arms, a death's-head on stilts, then hurled itself on Raven, enveloped him in a rippling fabric of tentacles. The squirming mass rolled to and fro, rose and sank, uprooted some of the smaller sponges.

"I can't see you, Raven," Topaz called. "This is nothing but octopus. Stick out a hand or something."

"Give me time," answered Raven. "I'm just getting myself oriented."

Although the octopus sought furiously to secure a grip upon the ultra-smoothness of the warp surface, Raven slid and twisted in its grasp like a lubricated roller bearing. His head and one arm were thrust deliberately from between the bases of two tentacles below the eyes of his antagonist. A puff of inky fluid darkened the water.

"It's throwing a screen," admonished Topaz. "Roll out of it, Raven. It spoils the definition."

"You might speak to this bit of shark bait about it," suggested Raven. "It's the one who's doing it."

He now had both arms free and was eye to eye with his opponent. Its beak gnawed madly at the warp covering his chest. They rolled over, Raven vanished, and the mollusk ejected another cloud while Topaz fumed. The roll carried them beyond the cloud and Raven came to view again. His hands were clasped together and in position to crack the vital ganglion.

In whatever crypt of dark ferocity that may serve as the mind of an octopus there now dawned a fearful realization that Raven was no ordinary victim to be rent apart and gulped down at leisure. It suddenly unwound its tentacles. The fold of skin was jerked from Raven's grasp.

"No you don't!" he cried, seized a stalked, moonstone eye with one hand, thrust the other hand between the jaws of its snapping beak. His arm disappeared to the shoulder while his steel-ridged glove tore through its vitals, sought and found and crushed its cold molluscan

heart. Both contestants were swallowed up in a gushing cloud of octopus ink.

Raven emerged from the cloud, trailing inky streamers.

"I cracked the ganglion also, just to make sure," he remarked. "The Triton Reef octopus squad can take away the remains."

"The action was good, but it didn't last long enough," Topaz commented.

The pool was now briefly suffused with scarlet light, then returned to its normal state of green radiance.

"What was that for?" Raven wondered.

"A signal, perhaps."

The illumination now blinked rapidly.

"Emergency code. The lights are talking. It was a signal."

"Capricorn now over the Reef," blinked the lights. *"All Tritons will go to their places. Prepare to embark."*

The message was repeated twice.

XI

The half-billion telescreen audience, its numbers now augmented by an additional million or so as various less essential activities throughout the world slowed down or came to a temporary halt, shifted their cramped limbs and viewed the descent of the *Capricorn* from her all-but-airless height. They saw it presented from three viewpoints, artfully interwoven in changing sequence from continuous transcriptions relayed and fitted together by the narrative editor aboard the *NE-6-137*. There were News Exchange televisors aboard the *Capricorn* also. They looked down upon an expanse of fog like a pavement of blue-shadowed gilded wool; saw it ripped aside from the face of Triton Reef by the *Capricorn's* mighty precipitators as if by the impatient gesture of an invisible titanic hand. They saw the fog-bedewed shield deck of the *NE-6-137;* saw it vanish in a blinding deluge of rain; saw the blue heavens open and reveal the *Capricorn*—a floating, gold-plated projectile reflecting the westerly sun with molten brilliance. From a televisor mounted by the outer elevator portal of the liance. From a televisor mounted by the outer elevator portal of the submersible docks they saw the *Capricorn* slide disdainfully alongside the News Exchange cruiser—golden whale and silver minnow.

The navigation cabin of the *Capricorn* was in her forekeel. The commander of that vessel was now fully aware of the nature of his mission and had forgotten his initial grievance over the interrupted schedule. Craving the satisfaction of direct contact via the unaided human voice, he hailed the *NE-6-137* from an open air lock with pretended ignorance and a brusqueness which had become habitual.

"Ahoy, you dust-breathing hedgehogs!" he shouted. "What sort of a layout is this? I'm told that you have here five hundred odd refugee sea nymphs who want to be taken off their island without getting their feet wet. Can't they swim? And no stereo! Where are your Communications experts? Did they forget their tools?"

"Well, well! If it isn't the *Capricorn,* practically dragging her belly on the ground!" replied the News Exchange officer in like vein. "Don't ask me for information; I'm just a bystander. You have your orders, so get on with the business."

The dock chamber re-echoed with the clangor and bustle incident to the embarkation of the Tritons when Raven and Topaz, intent on being at the focus of activity, returned thereto with Merling—who excused herself to locate Cragstar. The two submersible freighters which they had seen on their arrival were transferring the heaped-up cases on the docks to the *Capricorn* via the submarine portal and outer lagoon. The Tritons were being taken aboard by way of the elevator. On its downward trips the elevator disgorged successive loads of men and paraphernalia from the *Capricorn.*

The navigators of the *Kelonia,* still garbed in their warp suits, but with the hoods open, elbowed their way to the door of the elevator in time to see the emergence of a party similarly clad, save that the suits were not equipped with aerophores or cameras and were provided with oxygen tanks. Topaz clutched a sleeve.

"What goes on?" she inquired.

"Why, I saw you in the broadcast not long ago," exclaimed the one addressed. "This? It's an industrial warp suit. They use 'em in chemical works and such places. We're going after Vervain. He can bombard *us* as much as he likes."

"Stand aside, please," said a Triton at their elbow. "We're moving the loading conveyor to this pier."

They dodged the moving metal framework which whirred toward

them, suspended from overhead rails, and the warp-suit detachment was lost in the crowd.

Another party of Tritons entered the elevator. Raven caught fragments of conversation.

"—temporary quarters at Great Barrier. I'm staying there when we've built the permanent . . . search party hunting Cymorpagon . . . Florida Keys are my choice—"

When the elevator returned, it discharged a small rotor-driven truck with a load of gas cylinders marked in glaring red letters:

LETHEGEN! CAUTION!

"Lethegen! That's an idea," observed Raven. "I suppose it's for Vervain. But if they're going to use lethegen, then why do they need warp suits?"

"They can't just turn it loose anywhere," Topaz pointed out. "They might meet Vervain where they wouldn't want to use lethegen. There might be other people around."

Another trip by the elevator brought down another load of cylinders, this time lettered in white:

ANTIVECTOR GAS

"I'm beginning to understand," said Raven. "First they get him cornered. Then one gas, then the other. Where are they taking it?"

"Follow it and see."

The truck led them to one of the termini of the Triton Reef hydraulic tube transit system. Three bullet cars lay in their cradles by the loading platform. Topaz stooped to enter the passenger compartment of the nearest car, found her way blocked by a man in a warp suit.

"Oh, hello! I saw you in the broadcast," she was greeted by this individual. "No. You can't. I'm sorry, but those are orders. We don't know what else Vervain may have in addition to the diatrode gun, and we can't risk having superfluous spectators around. Yes, I see your warp suits, but I'm not running this undertaking. The answer is—No!"

The two retired for a hurried conference.

"The third car, down at the end—no one seems to be watching it," remarked Raven, pointing with a gloved finger.

They found the door of the passenger compartment locked.

"Try the freight door, and hurry!" hissed Topaz.

The metal panel slid back easily, revealed the dark interior of the chamber in the tail of the vehicle.

"Plenty of room," announced Raven. "We can cushion ourselves with this packing."

The chamber was half filled with fluffy, cottonlike material.

"I'll make a thick pad of it against the rear wall and lie with my back against it," decided Raven. "Then you build another pad in front of me and lie against that. That will take care of the acceleration."

They had scarcely disposed themselves in their nest of padding when a voice cried, "Who left this door open?"

Came a thud as the door closed on its water-tight casing, followed by a creaking of locks.

"How about the air in here?" inquired Topaz out of the thick darkness.

"We'll be in here for only a few minutes," Raven assured her. "There'll be enough."

Topaz squirmed restlessly.

"There's something hard underneath this stuff, something with ridges on it," she announced at length.

"Perhaps it's boxed parts for the stereo," guessed Raven.

As if in reply the door opened, something was tossed in with a thump, and Cragstar's voice was heard indistinctly.

"—Exchange has a relay system working, so they're not going to rebuild the stereo for the short time remaining."

The door closed again.

"That disposes of your theory," remarked Topaz. "What *are* these things under me?"

The compartment was illumined by the beam of her forehead disk. Followed a silken tearing and rustling as she dug into the packing, then a sudden stillness.

"Name of a green porpoise!"

"What's the matter?" Raven inquired curiously.

Topaz's light was extinguished.

"Lethegen cylinders! I hope the valves are all good."

"A little leak wouldn't hurt. We'd recover soon."

"But in the meantime— Everything might happen!"

The car began to move. It slid into the air lock with a *clang*. Water gurgled around it. Then—acceleration!

The valves of the lethegen cylinders were in perfect condition when the car started, but they had been stowed away hurriedly. An interspace between the valve of one cylinder and the base of the one ahead of it was not solidly packed. When the acceleration began the forward cylinder jerked back two inches—

An ear pressed close to the valve thereafter might have heard a minute sizzling.

Fifteen seconds later the car slid out of the air lock into Vervain's anteroom. A member of the warp-suit squad opened the freight compartment, detected a faint bananalike fragrance, hastily closed it again.

"Gas leak," he replied tersely to a companion's query as he closed the zipper of his suit and encapsulated himself in a warp sheath. The others did likewise.

"Test kit is in there with the cylinders," he continued, speaking into his radiophone. "I'll find the leaky one."

The two stowaways had been unable to surround themselves with protecting warps of their own because of the acceleration of the car during the first half of its transit; their arms had been pinioned at their sides. In that brief time the highly diluted lethegen had paralyzed the higher brain centers and they were removed from the compartment in a state of smiling vacuity.

Raven uttered one word: "Octopus."

"I shooed them away once," grumbled their rescuer. "What'll we do with 'em now?"

"Stand 'em up against the wall until they come out of it. They're only in the blank stage."

"They may fall over. Better sit them together on this bench. You can put them in any position and they'll stay. That's it. Bend their legs. Someone should keep an eye on them. You're appointed."

"Now then, where's Vervain?" asked the individual in charge of operations. "Is he still in the stereo room?"

"Yes."

"Is there anyone with him?"

"Triton named Kalamar, a sort of understudy to Vervain. Vervain let him in. I'm told that he seemed excited—said he wanted to verify something."

"We'll have to gas both of them. Where can we get at the air duct to the stereo room?"

"In Vervain's museum of oddities—the next room. There's a manhole into a service tunnel."

"Let's begin, then. We'd better keep our suits on until he's thoroughly gassed. He may come out at the first whiff."

A broadcast narrator in the conference hall leveled his televisor at the manhole leading to the service tunnel and bent over his microphone.

"The cylinders which are now being passed into the manhole contain lethegen," said the narrator. "An opening has been drilled into the air duct serving the stereo room and a stream of lethegen is being poured into it. They are using ten cylinders of lethegen, since a high concentration of the gas is desired and the stereo room is of fairly large volume. There goes the last cylinder, and Vervain has made no attempt to escape. Now the gas squad are removing their suits and piling them on the floor. One moment, please, while I inquire about this."

Pause, while the narrator made inquiries.

"There is no further need of the suits, since Vervain is undoubtedly reduced to a state of profound coma. Moreover, the expansion of the compressed oxygen which the gas squad have been breathing renders the interior of the suits cool and clammy. Now they are bringing in cylinders of antivector gas. This will sweep through the ventilating system and precipitate the lethegen as a shower of minute, stable, and innocuous crystals. The crystals are volatile at several degrees below body temperature; therefore they do not form in the lungs and cause irritation. The antivector gas does not neutralize the narcotic effect of the lethegen already inhaled and absorbed by the blood stream; that may be allowed either to disappear naturally—the length of time required depending on the amount absorbed—or it may be treated by other and more quickly effective means."

Two men mounted the steps to the door of the stereo room. The narrator continued:

"In a few moments we shall show you Vervain and the stereo room. There was a little difficulty in finding the reserve of duplicate keys—

a matter which was in Vervain's care. These massive portals, patterned after the air locks of interplanetary vessels, render it possible to isolate an accidentally flooded chamber. Ah! The door is opening."

The circular portal receded and a cloud of sparkling white crystals gushed from the lateral opening like an eddy of snow. A party of four entered the opening, reappeared lugging an inert figure.

"Is this Vervain?" queried the narrator. "No! It is Kalamar. And see! He is tightly bound with copper wire! What could have occurred in the stereo room?"

"There's a perfect fog in there," announced one of the men carrying Kalamar. "The crystals are still coming down. Kalamar was near the door. We couldn't see Vervain."

"Then behold him now!" boomed a huge voice.

Vervain was standing in the portal of the stereo room, dusted from head to foot with clinging white powder, the diatrode gun in his hands.

He descended the steps and stood astride the pile of discarded warp suits.

XII

"Raven! It did!"

Topaz found it strangely difficult to express herself.

"What did?" responded Raven dully.

"It leaked! I mean the gas, and we've been put off somewhere!"

"I don't care," yawned Raven; then exclaimed: "What did you say?"

Topaz repeated her remarks in more coherent form.

"We're in a tube station; there's three cars lined up," said Raven, his alertness returning, "and there's a lot of loud talking and running around going on—in there."

He turned toward the door of the conference hall, where Vervain had just made his appearance. The individual who had been detailed to "keep an eye on them" had been called upon to assist in carrying cylinders of antivector gas when it seemed certain that Vervain was *hors de combat.*

"This misguided one shall be an example," Vervain was saying; he gestured with the diatrode gun toward the bound and unconscious Kalamar. "I had not made up my mind what to do with him. He attacked me after I admitted him to the stereo room. Now I have decided.

Watch and take heed. Thus shall I deal with opposition. You who are supporting him may stand aside or not, as you wish; it is of no importance to me."

When Vervain had appeared, unscathed, after what should have been an overwhelming flood of lethegen, there had been a general outcry and momentary confusion in the conference hall, then a sudden stillness while he spoke. At the end of his pronouncement, the four who had brought out Kalamar laid their burden on the floor, sidled away—but they moved toward Vervain. All the occupants of the hall commenced a slow, cautious encircling movement toward Vervain.

While watching, listening myriads bit their lips, clenched their hands, rose from their seats, the broadcast narrator continued in a husky voice:

"It seems inevitable that Vervain will not be subdued without tragedy, unless— It has occurred to me that I may drive this mobile unit at Vervain, then leap off! I shall leave the televisor in operation. The broadast from this particular point will cease abruptly. You will observe that we are now rushing directly toward Vervain."

The narrator's voice rose.

"But wait! We have a new factor in the equation!"

Two figures had darted into the hall from the anteroom—two figures incased in the glistening fabric of warp armor. The detachable weighted uppers of the boots had been removed, leaving only the corrugated soles. These two also were speeding toward Vervain.

Vervain had aimed his weapon at the prostrate Kalamar; then he perceived the headlong rush of the mobile televisor. A fraction of a second later he discovered the charging figures of Raven and Topaz. He wavered, confused, by a multiplicity of targets.

The navigators of the *Kelonia* now executed a maneuver which had originated in a sport of the ancient world—a sport of indomitable vitality, surviving universal social collapse to rise again, curiously transformed in some details but still recognizably the same.

At a distance of fifty feet from Vervain, Raven panted into his stereophone:

"Now! Together!"

As one they cast themselves on the floor, hurtled toward Vervain feet-first, super-smooth warp skidding on smooth vitrolith pavement.

Under other circumstances it would have been a spectacular double slide to the home plate.

Vervain's legs were rammed by two pairs of steel-ribbed boot soles just as the televisor arrived. Vervain and televisor were overthrown together with a resounding crash. The narrator—who had forgotten to leap off in his concentration on Raven and Topaz—was catapulted into the tangle, further complicated by the pile of warp suits. The diatrode gun skittered over the floor. Raven rose from the heaving pile and slid after it.

A general rush—including two auxiliary televisors—converged on the melee.

Vervain heaved to his feet, shedding warp suits. The narrator tried to grip Vervain's legs, was kicked loose and sent rolling over the pavement. Topaz bounded up from her prone position, leaped upon Vervain's back, fastened herself there with a full nelson and a scissor grip around the waist. Raven rose on one knee with the gun in his hand. The narrator scrambled to his feet with a detached wheel of the televisor carriage in his grasp, threw it at Vervain. The wheel rebounded from Vervain's head, sailed through the air, struck the forehead of a gas-squad man, felled him in his tracks.

Vervain jerked his head backward with irresistible force, broke Topaz's grip with ease, bent forward suddenly, sent her somersaulting over his head. The smooth warp surface was ill-adapted for wrestling tactics. Topaz ended her flight on the narrator. Now Vervain snatched up the televisor, carriage and all, lifted it above his head, hurled it at Raven.

This fearful missile descended on Raven and burst over his warp as if it had fallen on a block of steel. The diatrode gun was discharged by the impact. A whirling blue globe sped toward Topaz, who was disentangling herself from the narrator. It collided with the warp sheath of her hood and thereupon disintegrated into a score of lesser globes which fled away from each other, mutually repelled, into all parts of the conference hall.

One of these secondary globules struck Vervain in the chest. It seemed to melt into him. His arms fell limply at his sides and he stood swaying lightly, face and body racked with muscular spasms. Then he became motionless, stiffly upright. The crowd approached him cautiously.

Raven struggled up from the wreckage of the televisor, shaking off fragments of glass and metal, and hastened toward the throng which had gathered about the rigidly erect body, unfastening his zipper as he ran.

A gas-squad man stood before Vervain, ear pressed against his chest.

"It would be understating it to say that he's out cold," said the gas-squad man. "He's cold as a fish's tail. It's a queer way for electrocution to affect a man. He's dead on his feet."

XIII

The body lay on a wheeled table in the dockmaster's office where it awaited transfer to the *Capricorn*. Kalamar, now fully recovered from the effects of the lethegen, stood beside it and spoke to the silent gathering which filled the room.

"There can be no doubt; there is not the slightest indication of life," declared Kalamar. "Does it not seem strange—this immediate bodily coldness, the initial rigidity followed by complete relaxation with no sign of rigor mortis? See—I can flex the arm, the fingers, without the slightest difficulty, yet they are entirely lacking in warmth. It seems that no one has the answer. Nautilus, where are our fingerprint files?"

"They are packed and on Pier 7, waiting to be taken aboard," was the surprised response.

"Have the case opened and bring me Vervain's fingerprints, together with the kit for taking prints, and the projector."

"Certainly. But why—"

"You shall see," replied Kalamar, a cryptic gleam in his eye.

When the requested articles had been brought, Kalamar took the prints of the flaccid fingers on a glass slide and inserted two slides in the projector. The images were thrown on the ceiling.

"On this side are Vervain's authentic prints," Kalamar explained. "On the other are the ones which I have just taken."

An outburst of protests followed. The authentic prints showed the usual tracery of lines and whorls; the others were mere featureless smears, with no distinguishing characteristics save some irregularities in the prints of the left fingers.

"The authentic prints cannot be questioned," replied Kalamar to the objectors. "I reprinted everyone in the Reef when I took charge of the

fingerprint file. No, Vervain has never suffered an injury since then which obliterated the markings. I am not contradicting myself when I say that the irregularities in the prints from the left hand of this body are due to burns which were inflicted today. These new prints are not those of anyone in Triton Reef; they do not match Vervain's because *they are not Vervain's fingerprints.*"

"What preposterous nonsense! Are you mad also?" sputtered Nautilus. "We just saw you take them!"

"You did not see me take Vervain's fingerprints; that is impossible at the moment," retorted Kalamar. He turned and pointed at the figure on the wheeled table. "It is impossible because *that is not Vervain's body!*"

"Then whose is it?"

"When did the substitution take place?"

"Where *is* the body of Vervain?"

"It would be more to the point to ask, 'Where is Cymorpagon?'" responded Kalamar. "As to the identity of these remains, that will not be difficult to establish."

He placed a small, flat case upon the table, opened it, and exposed a glittering array of dissecting instruments.

"When we have done that—and it will not require much time—we must proceed to the much more important task of finding Vervain. I am now positive that—"

The following words, if any, were washed away in a tidal wave of sound—from the cosmic standpoint, a mere creaking of Earth's framework; to the inhabitants of Triton Reef, the infernal bellowing of blind, elemental power on the loose. Cubic miles of rock stirred and moved upward half an inch. A section of the granitoid dome above the dock basin rumbled, split, plunged into the pool with a roaring impact, engulfed it in darkness, sent a great wave washing over the wharves and into the dockmaster's office. Through the ragged gap in the dome appeared the serene green-blue of the evening sky and the lucid brilliance of Venus.

The occupants of the office were left floundering on the floor like stranded fish. Nautilus struggled to his feet, unhooked the flashlight at his girdle, swept its beam around the room. The wheeled table had been relieved of its burden. Other beams pierced the darkness. There were shoutings and moving lights along the docks.

"The body is gone!" cried Kalamar. "Look on the floor!"

But it was not there.

"Perhaps it was carried out in the backwash," suggested Nautilus.

"No, it is here," replied a new voice.

Vervain's voice! Without doubt, Vervain's voice! The alien quality had vanished.

A dozen beams were turned toward the source of these words.

Vervain—or that which appeared to be Vervain, and which Kalamar had pronounced lifeless—was standing among them.

"Regardless of appearances, I am not Vervain," declared the enigmatic one, tapping himself on the chest. "Kalamar, I believe, will understand. Follow me and I will show you where I am—I mean, where Vervain is. We must go to Cymorpagon's quarters. I see that the way is already open."

He indicated a panel of the wall; it had swung outward on hinges. A triangular notch had been cut in the vertical edge and the detached fragment lay on the floor. Both notch and fragment showed a bright edge of a newly cut metal.

"But—that was not open ten minutes ago!" exclaimed Raven, who for a time had been stricken wordless by the whirl of events.

"Therefore it was opened during the quake," replied he who was not Vervain. "Cymorpagon opened it by cutting out the lock. I presume he dived from the dock, swam through the portal, and is now outside the Reef. Probably we shall find the cutting tool at the bottom of the shaft."

"What shaft?" inquired Cragstar.

"I can answer that," said Kalamar. "That panel was once a grid opening into a vertical air duct. It was part of the ventilating system of the living quarters for the Drylander staff which manned Triton Reef in its early days. The chambers have been empty and abandoned for years; most of the entrances are sealed."

"But we examined all those chambers when we searched for Cymorpagon," protested Nautilus.

"Not all," corrected Vervain's double. "There were some which you did not discover; they are carefully camouflaged. If you will refer to the old blueprints of the Reef you will see them. Now, if you will follow me—"

They descended the shaft by a built-in ladder of metal. The air in the duct was dank and stagnant. As their guide had predicted, the cutting tool lay at the bottom of the shaft; he picked it up and took it with him. A horizontal tube led them to a seamless blue-metal door.

"Beyond this lies Cymorpagon's hidden workroom," announced he who seemed to be Vervain. "The door is water-tight and provided with multiple locks. It will be simplest to carve ourselves a passage with the implement so conveniently left behind by Cymorpagon."

The cutting tool was of the type known as a decoherence cutter, or decoherotome. It slid through the metal with a crackling sound, leaving a transient phosphorescent trail, cleanly excised a circular block. The Vervain who was not Vervain pushed on the block and it fell inward with a clang; light streamed from the space beyond. He spoke over his shoulder as he started to crawl through the opening.

"You will wait here a few moments until I call you."

After a short lapse of time Vervain's voice said, "Enter."

The others peered into the chamber and beheld—two Vervains, standing side by side. A framework of intersecting rings like a huge armillary sphere reared its fabric behind them.

For a few seconds the two figures stood motionless, then one of them smiled and stepped forward.

"Your faces are a study in astonishment," he remarked. "Meet my *alter ego,* Vervain the Robot. It is he who brought you here—and who now releases me. Let me show you how he works."

When the others had entered and assembled around the framework of rings, Vervain clambered into the midst of it and snapped a metal harness about his arms, his legs, his body; inserted his head in a suspended helmet.

"This is the pantograph control," Vervain's voice came hollowly from the helmet. "From my cell I have seen it operated by Cymorpagon. Now I throw it into operation."

Lights glowed; Vervain was lifted and hung floating at the center of the skeleton sphere; the various rings moved and shifted slightly but noiselessly on each other. The robot duplicated Vervain's posture and began to speak.

"This harness is now enveloped in a transmitting field similar to that used in stereotelephony," said the robot, gesturing toward Vervain,

who gestured away from the robot. "The robot carries a transmitter of its own, drawing power from here. I see what it sees, hear what it hears; it transmits my voice, does what I do. To duplicate facial expressions would involve refinements which Cymorpagon did not attempt."

The robot walked around the stereo-pantograph while Vervain trod on air within the shifting rings.

"If any part of the robot encounters an obstacle," it continued, "a certain resistance is transmitted to me through the pantograph. This is its nearest approach to a sense of touch. Only through this, and vision, do I have any information as to the surface on which the robot happens to be walking. It has no sense of smell and—fortunately for the operator—no sense of pain. It is not overly difficult to operate; one has only to project oneself in imagination into the scene revealed in the televisor, within this helmet. See—I make it climb this grating, the door of my cell from which I watched Cymorpagon, then climb down again. In passing, you may ask how I opened it. I didn't. The last quake did that."

Vervain switched off the pantograph, descended from the framework.

"I am curious to know how you vanquished the robot," he said. "Not long before the quake, something happened to Cymorpagon. There was an electrical discharge from the pantograph; Cymorpagon was surrounded by a faint bluish corona for a few seconds, and hung limply for quite a long time thereafter. I thought he was dead. Then he began to groan, and hurriedly climbed down from the pantograph, muttering about something he had seen in the televisor. After that he took the cutting tool and departed, leaving me in my cell."

Raven and others gave a brief description of the struggle in the stereo room.

"It seems, Raven, that yours is the first authentic instance of mechanicide," said Vervain.

"Is that also part of the stereo-pantograph?" inquired Cragstar, indicating a bewildering mechanism which occupied one whole wall of the room.

"No, that is Cymorpagon's earthquake machine," responded Vervain. "He gave me quite a discourse on it when the robot Vervain was supposed to be asleep. He claimed to exert a secret control over the geodyne converters by means of it. Actually it is no more than the im-

aginings of an insane mechanical genius, made visible. It moves, it seems to do things, but accomplishes nothing. Any tampering with the converters would obviously register on the indicator panels. Even if Cymorpagon's scheme of producing artificial Earth movements were theoretically possible, the little driblet of energy which our entire geodyne plant extracts from the Earth's core would be a microscopic portion of the required amount.

"His mind seemed divided into two compartments. With one, he discharged his duties in the geodyne plant with outstanding efficiency. With the other, he conceived things like this. And at the same time he was astute enough to provide his workroom with a self-contained source of energy, so that there would be no drain on the Reef power lines."

"How did he get in and out of this place ordinarily?"

"Through the tool closet. It has a sliding floor which communicates with his sleeping pool. That's how I came in. He must have spent years in building this hide-out, little by little."

"Which brings us to the 'evidence' he spoke of," remarked Kalamar. "What was it? And his opposition to the ambitions of our children—where does that fit in? He seemed plausible for a while—I regret to say."

"There was no 'evidence'," responded Vervain. "That was pure deception. I doubted its existence, but I had to know the facts, whatever they were, and walked into the trap. I did not expect to be forcibly imprisoned. I believe that his opposition was sincere in part. He was among the earlier synthetic Tritons—a laboratory infant, drawn squalling from a cylinder of sterile plasm. The technique was not so precise then, and as he grew older he brooded over his physical differences. Triton Reef was his fortress; he feared the other world. He became an obsession—psychopathic."

"But the robot, in your likeness! Cymorpagon couldn't have made that," objected Nautilus. "He was no anatomist."

"True. But he was a warp engineer. He fitted it with pantograph control," responded Vervain. "I do not know when he obtained the body. The head—Kalamar will remember that."

"It was made as a jest," Kalamar informed them, "during my student days. We always made the heads in the likeness of someone. As I

recall, yours was mounted on a pedestal and provided with a phonographic attachment."

"And presented to me," finished Vervain. "Eventually Cymorpagon admired it and I gave it to him. It may be that it was then he conceived his puerile dream of a Triton autocracy."

"Cymorpagon was about two thousand years late," said Cragstar reflectively. "If he had lived in the times of those skew-minded people who thought that they could rule the world single-handed—you know whom I mean. There was one called Butler, or Whistler—I can't think of the name at the moment."

"You're thinking of Hittelberg," Raven declared prompty. "There was a university town by the same name in this country."

"I am never very quick at remembering historical names," apologized Cragstar.

The *Kelonia* had turned her prow northwestward toward Pitcairn Island, rose and fell on the pursuing rollers which broke over her stern with a rhythmic swashing. Overhead, a star-dusted sky in a rare interval of clarity. Raven and Topaz gazed toward Triton Reef through the aft port of the control cabin.

"The Reef hasn't been so lit up since the S. P. C. engineers finished it, I'll wager," remarked Raven.

Half a mile above it hovered the *Capricorn,* the Tritons and their belongings now safely aboard. She was bejeweled with lighted portholes, and played a ten-million-candlepower beam over the crags and spume geysers of Triton Reef. Another giant beam burned down upon the *NE-6-173,* afloat at a lower level, transmuting her into a spindle of silver flame. The NE cruiser in turn sprayed the *Capricorn,* the Reef, the sea with a fan of lesser beams, sent them twizzling to the horizon and back again, splashed golden coruscations from the sleek hull of the *Capricorn.*

At Communications Central Narhajian's transcription editors had already nearly completed building up a master cartridge into a progressive, coherent narrative, which presently would begin to unreel its tale of strange history made and stranger history in the making, by wire and radio and stereo beam. Around the world the duplicators in their millions waited to reproduce that cartridge, for study and repetition at the receiver's leisure:

THE SAGA OF THE TRITONS

The narrative began:

CHAPTER THE FIRST

Vervain and Kalamar, aboard the *Capricorn,* stood on a deck of silicoid and looked down upon the Reef through a half mile of vacancy.

"At first, I thought that you were under some form of mental control," said Kalamar, "although so far as I knew, Cymorpagon was no hypnotist. I began to suspect when I laid my hand on your—on the robot's—arm. It was cold, cold and rubbery. Then I thought of the line like a scar around the neck."

"Somewhere down there he still lives—I hope," mused Vervain, thinking of Cymorpagon as the illumination poured over Rhinoceros Rock. "The Reef is well provisioned. We may find him when we return to salvage the heavy equipment— What's that?"

A tiny, glistening, black figure was creeping antlike toward the summit of the peak on Rhinoceros Rock.

Hooded televisors were hastily uncovered. The weary telescreen audience, slowly dispersing or sprawled about their instrument among the litter of hastily prepared refreshments, were galvanized by a terse announcement.

"Cymorpagon has shown himself on one of the islets of the Reef. The *Capricorn* is launching a boat to take him off."

But the rescue party never reached Cymorpagon. A televisor with telescopic attachment, aboard the lifeboat, caught a brief picture of him atop the horn of Rhinoceros Rock. He was drenched in the vivid glare of the *Capricorn's* beam, a figure of blue-black and silver with luminescent eyes. He stood with feet widely planted, hands clasped behind him. He seemed to be trembling, but he was not. Rhinoceros Rock itself was quivering.

Cymorpagon regarded the descending lifeboat—not with the imploring, terrified eyes of a proper castaway—but with contempt, defiance, even triumph. He swayed with the swaying of the rock, struck himself on the chest with one hand, made a sweeping gesture with the other, as if to say, "This is my handiwork!"

The televisor on the lifeboat abruptly lost Cymorpagon's image. Rhinoceros Rock was crumpling, sliding, disintegrating in cascades of flying granite. The sea was laced with interweaving lines of foam like the sand patterns on a vibrating plate. Sea and sky shook with the thunder of invisible artillery. The ruins of Rhinoceros Rock, the crumbling dome which covered the submersible docks, a dozen neighboring pinnacles sank and vanished like foundering ships. A great circular wave, white-crested, spread outward from the debacle.

The wave overtook the *Kelonia.* She soared upward to the stars while Raven and Topaz staggered on the leaping deck, clawed madly for handholds. Then she plunged downward until it seemed for a few frantic moments that she must surely dash herself against the ocean bottom.

"Even madness may serve a purpose," whispered Kalamar. "If Cymorpagon had been sane, the submersible fleet would be three days' away and we should be down there with him."

The sunken wreck of Triton Reef lay far astern. Astern of the *Capricorn,* skirting the fringes of the outer void. Astern of the *Kelonia,* unhurriedly cleaving the sea at five fathoms. But aboard both craft the dreams were the same—dreams of shallow seas under kindlier skies, and sun-gilded groves of sponge and coral.

The Chronicler

BY A. E. VAN VOGT

I

BEFORE THE CORONER'S JURY

STATEMENT OF THOMAS BARRON

My name is Thomas Barron. For nine years I have been a partner in the brokerage firm of Slade & Barron. I never suspected Michael Slade was abnormal. He was a strong character, and I always thought him rather a superior individual.

I saw him a dozen times after the car accident that precipitated events, mostly in connection with my purchase of his share of the business. He gave me no inkling of anything wrong, and I have no idea what actually happened.

The crash was over, the car neatly turned on its top. Slade sprawled dizzily on his back, conscious that he had lost his glasses. Something warm trickled from his forehead into his left eye.

He wiped it away, and saw with a start that it was blood. He mustered a smile for his wife, who was sitting up. He said:

"Well, we survived. I don't know what happened. The steering gear broke, I think."

He stopped. Miriam was close enough for his nearsighted eyes, even without glasses, to see that she was gazing at him in mixed horror and alarm.

"Michael, your forehead—the soft spot! It's torn, bleeding, and—*Michael, it's an eye.*"

Slade felt blank. Almost automatically, he bent towards the rearview mirror, tilting it upwards to catch his head. The skin was torn raggedly starting about an inch from the hairline, and coming down about two inches.

A third eye was plainly visible.

The eyelid of it was closed by a surplus of sticky matter, but abruptly he grew aware that it was pulsing with a vague perception of light.

It began to hurt.

LOCAL MAN HAS THREE EYES

A car accident, which tore a layer of skin from the forehead of Michael Slade yesterday revealed that the young business executive has three eyes. Mr. Slade, when interviewed in the hospital, where he was taken by a passing motorist, seemed in good spirits, but could offer no reason for his possession of a third eye. "I always had that soft spot in my forehead," he said. "The eye itself seems to be a thoroughly useless appendage. I can't imagine Nature's purpose."

He admitted that it was very likely that he would have the skin grafted into place again. "People," he said, "go to sideshows to see freaks. Otherwise they don't like to look at them."

The discovery of a three-eyed man in this small city caused a buzz of interest in local scientific circles. At Technical High, Mr. Arthur Trainor, biology teacher, suggested that it was either a mutation, or else that a third eye was once common to human beings, and this is a retrogression. He felt, however, that the latter possibility was controverted by the fact that two eyes were normal throughout the entire animal world. There was, of course, the gland known as the pineal eye.

Dr. Joseph McIver, eye specialist, thought that it would be an interesting experiment to bring all three eyes back to perfect vision. He agreed that this would be difficult, since Mr. Slade's third eye has a bare perception of light, and also because the famous eye training systems now in existence have a hard enough time getting two imperfect eyes back to focus together and work perfectly.

"Nevertheless," Dr. McIver concluded, "the human brain is a strange and wonderful machine. When it is relaxed, everything balances. But when it is tensed for any reason, eye, ear, stomach and other organic troubles begin."

Mrs. Slade, whom our reporter tried to interview, could not be reached.

BEFORE THE CORONER'S JURY

STATEMENT OF MRS. M. SLADE

My name is Miriam Leona Crenshaw. I am the former Mrs. Michael Slade. I divorced Mr. Slade and have legal right to use my maiden name. I met Michael Slade about six years ago, and had no suspicion that he was anything but a normal individual.

I saw my husband only twice after the car accident that revealed his abnormality. The first time it was to plead with him to change his mind about keeping all his three eyes visible. But he had been profoundly influenced by a comment in the press by a local eye specialist concerning the possibility that he might recover the vision of his three eyes. And he felt that publicity had then been so widespread that any attempt at deception was useless.

This determination was the sole reason for our separation, and it was to sign the separation papers that I saw him the second time.

I know nothing special of subsequent events. I did not even look at the body. Its crushed condition having been described to me, I refused to view it.

Slade sat palming and glancing at the Snellen charts, waiting for the eye specialist.

The sun was shining down on the chart, but he himself was in shadow, and comfortably ensconced in an easy-chair. Relaxation, that was the secret.

Only, after nearly three months of doing it on his own from books, his progress had been comparatively tiny.

Footsteps crunched on the walk. Slade looked up at the eye specialist curiously. Dr. McIver was a tall gray-haired man of fifty-five or so; that much was visible to Slade without glasses.

The doctor said: "Your man told me I would find you here."

He did not wait for a reply, but stood at ease, looking across the lawn at the three charts, respectively five, ten and twenty feet from the chair in which Slade sat.

"Well," he said, "I see you're familiar with the principles of eye training. I wish a billion more people would realize how satisfactory it is to have a light of ten thousand candlepower shining from the sky into their back yards. I think," he confided, "before I die I shall become a sun worshiper!"

Slade found himself warming to the man. He had been a little doubtful, when he had phoned Dr. McIver, about inviting even a specialist into his problem. But his doubts began to fade.

He explained his trouble. After nearly three months his third eye could see the ten-foot line at one foot, but with each additional foot that he drew back from the chart, its vision became worse out of all proportion to the extra distance. At three feet he could barely see the two hundred foot C.

"In other words," Dr. McIver said, "it's largely mental now. Your

mind is suppressing images with which it is familiar, and you can be almost certain that it is suppressing them because it has been in the habit of doing so."

He turned, and began to unpack his bag. "Let's see," he said confidently, "if we can't persuade it to give in."

Slade could literally feel himself relaxing before the glowing positivities of this man. This was what he needed. For long now, tensions must have been building up inside him. Unconsciously he must be resenting his slow progress.

"A few questions first," said Dr. McIver, straightening with a retinoscope in his hand: "Have you been reading fine print every day? Can you 'swing' the letters? Have you acustomed your eyes to direct sunlight? O.K.! Let's begin with the right eye without palming."

Slade was able to read at twenty feet the line that should have been visible at fifty. He was aware of McIver standing eight feet away studying his eye through the retinoscope. The eye specialist nodded finally.

"Vision of right eye 20/50. Astigmatism of two diopters." He added: "Do you practice looking at dominoes?"

Slade nodded. Up to a point he had made considerable progress with the muscle imbalance that caused the astigmatism which affected all three of his eyes.

"Left eye next," said Dr. McIver. And a little later: "Vision 20/70, astigmatism of 3 diopters."

"Center eye, vision 3/200, astigmatism of 11 diopters. Now palm."

Palming produced long flashes of 20/20 vision in his right and left eyes, and a bare instant of 5/70 vision in his center eye.

"I think," said Dr. McIver, "we shall start by trying for a better illusion of black. What you see may seem black to your imagination, but you're fooling yourself. Afterwards, we'll do some whipping and shifting, and bounce a few tennis balls."

He fumbled in his bag, and came up with a roll of black materials. Slade recognized a black fur piece, black wool, black cotton, a square of black cardboard, black silk, a piece of black metal, a hand-engraved ebony ornament, and a variety of familiar black items including a plastic fountain pen, a bow tie, and a small book with a black cover."

"Look them over," McIver said. "The mind cannot remember any shade of black more than a few seconds. Palm, and switch your imagination from one to the other of these items."

After half an hour, Slade had improved noticeably the vision of each eye. He could see the large C with his third eye at twenty feet, and the R and B below it were recognizable blurs. But perfect vision was still a long, long way off.

"Again, palm," said Dr. McIver. This time he went on talking softly as Slade closed his eyes. "Black is black is black. There is no black but black. Black, pure, unadulterated black is black black."

It was nonsense with a pattern of reason in it. Slade found himself smiling, as he visualized the black in the various articles that McIver had placed on his lap. Black, he thought, black, wherefore art thou, black?

As simply as that it came. Black as black as the black of a moonless, starless night, black as printer's ink, black as all the black that the mind of man ever conceived. The black.

He opened his center eye, and saw the ten line on the twenty-foot chart. He blinked, but it was still there as bright and black as the print itself. Startled, he opened the other two eyes. And still there was no blurring. With 20/10 vision in all three of his eyes he looked around his back yard.

He *saw!*

At first, the fence and the other residences and the charts and all the shrubbery remained as a part of the scene. It was like looking at two pictures, with one superimposed upon the other, like two images coming through two different sets of eyes. But images of different scenes.

The familiar one—his own back yard, and the hill to the right and the rooftops of his neighbors that made up his horizon—had the effect of blurring the other, stranger scene.

Gradually, however, its outlines pushed through. To his left, where the houses fell away into a large shallow depression, was an enormous expanse of marsh, thick with brilliant growth. To his right, where the hill had always hidden his view, were scores of caves with fires burning at their openings.

The smoke from the fires rose up in curling tongues of black and gray, and intensified the blur that already half hid the Morton and Gladwander mansions, which dominated the hill. They kept fading, fading. And now, Slade saw that the hill with the caves was somewhat higher and steeper than the hill with the houses. There was a wide ledge that

ran along in front of the caves. And it was on this ledge that he suddenly noticed something else.

Human beings! They moved around, now bending over pots that hung above the fires, now adding wood to the fires, or disappearing into the caves, and then emerging again. There were not many, and most of them had long hair characteristic of women, or else they were small and childlike. Their primitive clothes—clearly visible even at this distance—made the reality of them unnatural.

Slade sat there. He had a remote impulse to get up, but it was too soon yet for reaction or even understanding. At last memory came that this was happening as a result of improvement in his vision; and the lightning thought followed: What in the name of sanity had happened?

It was too vague as yet, that tugging amazement, and besides there was still the scene of the cave dwellers becoming clearer and clearer to his vision. The houses and his own yard were just shimmering images, like fading mirages, like things dimly seen through an all-enveloping haze.

For the first time Slade realized that his eyes had been straining to hold those two scenes, but that the strain was lessening, as the second one took stronger and stronger hold of his attention.

The paralysis left him. Quite automatically, he stood up.

He noted, with enormous and developing interest, that, where the marsh ended, a rolling meadow began, spotted here and there with bright splashes of gigantic flowering shrubs, and in the distance trees that looked amazingly tall.

Everything was as clear and bright as a summer sun could make it. A warm, glowing wilderness, almost untouched by man, spread before him. It was like a fairy land, and he stared and stared.

At last, with wondering delight, he turned to look at the other horizon—and the girl must have started the same instant around the tree that was there.

She was tall and very straight. She must have been intending to swim in the stream that babbled into the marsh a few yards away because, except for a rather ornamental silvery belt around her waist, she had no clothes on.

She had three eyes, and all three of them appraised Slade with amazement but without a shade of embarrassment. There was something else

in her manner that was not so prepossessing, even a little repellent. It was the dominating look of a woman accustomed to think only of herself. He had time to realize that she was older than she looked.

The woman's eyes were narrowing. She spoke in a violin-toned contralto, meaningless words, but offensively sharp in tone.

She began to fade. The trees, the great marsh, the hill, partly visible to his left now, faded perceptibly. A house showed through her body, and, all around, the earth as he had known it for years took swift form.

Suddenly, there was the yard, and himself standing beside his chair. There was Dr. McIver, his back to Slade, peering around the corner of the house. The eye specialist turned, and his face lighted as he saw Slade.

"Where did you go?" he asked. "I turn my back, and you're off without a word."

Slade made no immediate reply. The pain in his eyes was like a fire. It burned and burned.

BEFORE THE CORONER'S JURY

STATEMENT OF DR. McIVER

I had personal contact with Michael Slade over a period of about two and a half months. For an hour a day I assisted him with his eye training. It was a slow process, as, after apparently recovering the first day, he had an unusually sharp retrogression.

When I asked him about any particular effects he had observed during his brief spell of good vision he hesitated a long time, and then shook his head.

At the end of ten weeks his third eye had a normal vision of only 10/400. He decided then that he was going to take a holiday on his farm at Canonville, in the hope that his childhood surroundings would relax his mind, and so effect a cure.

I understand he later returned to his home, but I did not see him again until I was called to identify his smashed body in the morgue.

II

The first day on the farm! It was distinctly cooler. A September breeze was blowing over the pasture, when Slade settled down with his eye charts. He glanced at the sun, already low in the west, for he had arrived late. And he sighed. The day was almost gone.

It had to be today. That feeling was strong in him. This afternoon

he was still convinced that it would be easy to recall the relaxed days of his childhood on the farm. By tomorrow, if he failed today, the tension of doubt would have set in.

Then, too, there had been the anxious feeling way in the back of his mind about the cave dwellers. He was just a little reluctant to appear within a stone's throw of a primitive tribe. Here, on this prairie, it was different. It was very unlikely that any inhabitants of that obviously sparsely settled world would be anywhere in the vicinity.

What the mind wants to see, Slade thought, *it* will *see if it is there to see.* He was creating conditions where his mind would again want to see.

He palmed, and then looked at the chart with his center eye. He could see the big C at twenty feet; the R and B below it were a blur, and the T F P a blotch of gray. As an improvement it was practically worthless.

He palmed again. The eyeball, according to the eye training theorists, was a round organ, which elongated for near vision, and flattened for distance vision. Some of the practitioners were willing to concede the possibility that the ciliary muscles did, in addition, change to some extent the shape of the lens.

But whatever the explanation behind the reality that the system worked, if the muscles pulled disproportionately, vision was poor. The fact that those muscles were controlled by the imagination, a difficult part of the mind to train, made the problem all the more intricate for people who had long worn glasses or had eye trouble.

The solution, Slade thought, *is in me. I have got rid of all the astigmatism in my right or left eye, yet my center eye persists in being astigmatic, sometimes to the point of blindness.*

It was of the mind, his trouble. His eye had proved that it was able to function normally.

About an hour before sundown, his brain was still refusing to work with the third eye.

Perhaps, Slade thought, *if I went to the various spots, of which I have particularly vivid childhood memories, I'd be able to recapture the mood and—*

First, the creek beside which he had hidden so often in the brush, and watched the cars go by to their remote and wonderful destinations.

The grass had grown deep where he had once worn it down with his

small body. He knelt, and the scent was a tang in his nostrils. He pressed his face to the cool, green softness of it, and he lay quiet, conscious of his weariness and of the sustained effort he had made during the past months.

Am I a fool? he wondered. *Did I turn my wife against me, break off with my friends, all in order to follow a will-o'-the-wisp?*

And had he really seen that other world, or was that some fantastic illusion which his mind had experienced during a profound organic readjustment?

His mood of depression intensified. The sun went down, and twilight was yielding to darkness when he finally started back along the bank of the creek towards the farmhouse.

In the darkness he couldn't find the path, and so he struck across the pasture, stumbling once in a while through thicker patches of grass. He could see the light of the end window of the farmhouse, but it seemed farther away than he remembered. The first alarm came with that realization, but it wasn't until five minutes later that a far more telling fear struck into him. The fence! He should have come to the fence long ago.

The light seemed to be only a few hundred feet from where he stopped short.

Slade sank slowly down onto the grass. He swallowed hard, and then he thought: *This is ridiculous. I'm imagining things.*

But there was an empty sensation in the pit of his stomach, as he strove to penetrate the intense darkness all around him. There was no moon, and clouds must have been heavy overhead, for not a single star showed. The light in the near distance glowed with a hazy but bright steadiness. It failed, however, to illuminate the building from which it came.

Slade blinked at it with a gathering fascination, his tenseness draining before the consciousness that it would probably be easy to get back to Earth. After all, he had *thought* himself here. He should be able to get back without too much trouble.

He climbed to his feet, and began to walk forward. As the light drew nearer, it seemed to him that it was coming from inside a doorway. Vaguely, he could make out that the doorway was inset under a curving sweep of metal, that bulged far out. The metal gleamed dully, and

then merged with the general blackness without leaving a hint of the shape of the whole structure.

Slade hesitated about a hundred feet from the entrance. He was even more fascinated than he had been, but his desire to investigate was dwindling. Not now, in this dark night of a strange plane of existence. Wait till morning. And yet he had the uneasy conviction that before dawn the tensions would have reasserted in his mind.

One knock at the door, he thought, *one look inside. And then off into the darkness.* The door was metal, and so solid that his knuckles made only the vaguest sound. He had some silver coins in his pocket, and they tinged with a sharp sound as he used them. Instantly, he stepped back, and waited.

The silence grew tremendous, like a pall pushing at him. Dark and silent night in a primitive land inhabited by cavemen and—

And what? This was no caveman's residence. Was it possible he had come to a plane of Earth entirely separate from that of the nude girl he had seen?

He retreated into the shadows away from the light. He stumbled, barking his shins. On one knee, he felt the object over which he had nearly fallen. Metal. That brought a thrill of real interest. Cautiously, he pressed the button of his flashlight, but it wouldn't light. Slade cursed under his breath, and tugged at the metal thing in the ground. That was the trouble. It was in the ground. And held hard.

It seemed to be a wheel attached to a boxing of some kind. He was still fumbling over it, tugging tentatively, when it began to rain. That sent him to the nearest brush for cover. But the rain grew heavier, until finally the bush poured water on him. Slade accepted his fate, and headed back for the doorway. He tried the latch, and pushed. The door opened immediately.

The interior was brightly lighted, a long, high, wide corridor of dully shining metal. About a hundred feet away, the massive hallway ended in a cross corridor. There were three doorways on each side of the corridor.

He tried the doors one after another. The first one opened into a long, narrow room that was all shiny blue mirror. At least, it looked like a mirror. Then he grew aware that stars were shining in its depth.

Slade closed the door hastily. It wasn't that he felt fear. But his mind had hesitated, unable to interpret what it was seeing. Its hold on this

world was far too precarious for him to subject it to incomprehensible strangeness.

He moved across the hall to the first door on his left. It opened onto a long, narrow room half filled with case on case of goods. Some of them were open, their contents spilled out on the floor. Instruments glittered up at him, a quantity array of miscellaneous gadgets of all sizes. Some of the boxes were haphazardly pulled aside, as if a searcher had been looking for some specific item.

Slade closed that door too, puzzled but without any threatening strain this time. A storeroom was a recognizable thing, and his mind accepted it without there being any necessity for him to identify what was in the boxes.

The two middle doors revealed identical interiors. Massive machines that towered three quarters of the way to the ceiling. In spite of their size Slade recognized them for what they were. For more than a year American papers and magazines had shown pictures of the atomic engine developed at the University of Chicago for rocket ships. The design was slightly different, but the general tenor was unmistakable.

Slade closed each door in turn, hastily. And stood in the hallway, dissatisfied with his situation. A spaceship settled on a lonely moor in an alien plane of existence, brilliantly lighted inside, and a solitary light outside like a beacon in the night beckoning to wanderers like himself, offering surcease from the darkness—was that the reality?

Slade doubted it, and a grisly feeling came that he had willed himself into a nightmare, and that any instant he would wake up, perspiring, in his bed.

But the instants passed, and there was no waking. Gradually, his mind accepted the silence, the brief panic faded, and he tried the fifth door.

It opened into darkness. Slade stepped back hastily. His eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, and so after scant seconds he saw the shape. It was pressed against the darkest wall, and it watched him alertly from three eyes that gleamed brightly in the vaguely reflected light. One swift look Slade had, and then his mind refused the vision.

Instantly, the ship, the light, vanished. He fell about three feet to a grassy embankment. Half a mile away was a yellow glowing light. It turned out to be his own farmhouse.

He was back on Earth.

Slade remained on the farm, undecided. The vision of all three of his eyes had deteriorated this time, and besides he was a badly shaken man. It couldn't have been the same woman, he told himself. Standing there in the shadows of a corridor of an old, seemingly deserted spaceship, the same young woman—watching him.

And yet, the resemblance to the nude cave girl had been so apparent to his brain that he had instantly been under an abnormal strain. His mind proved that it recognized her by the speed with which it *rejected* the logic of her presence.

The question was, should he continue his exercises? For a whole month he walked the reaches of the farm, unable to make up his mind. And the main reason for his indecision was his realization that his return to the two-eyed world had not been absolutely necessary.

Normal vision was a product of many balancing factors, not only mental but physical. Muscles weakened by glasses or by disuse lacked the endurance to resist the shudderingly swift impulses of the mind. Properly strengthened, they would withstand far greater shocks than he had experienced.

A demonic woman, he thought, *standing in the shadows of a shadow ship in a shadow land.* He was no longer sure he wanted to commit himself to that other plane of existence—to a woman who was aware of him, and who was trying to lure him.

After a month, the first snowfall whitened the foothills. Still undecided, Slade returned to the city.

STATEMENT OF PROFESSOR GRAY

My name is Ernest Gray, and I am a professor of languages. Some time ago—I cannot remember the exact date—I received a visit from Michael Slade. It seems that he had been away on his farm, and that, on returning to his city home, he learned that, in his absence, a three-eyed woman had visited his home.

From the account Mr. Slade gave me, I understand that his manservant admitted the woman to the house—she seems to have been a very assured and dominating individual—and permitted her to remain five days as a guest. At the end of that time, the day before Mr. Slade's return, she departed leaving behind her nearly a score of phonograph records and a letter. Mr. Slade showed me the letter. Although it is to be shown to the jury as a separate exhibit, I am herewith including it in my statement to clarify my own account. The letter read as follows:

Dear Mr. Slade:

I want you to use the phonograph records to learn the language of Naze. The key record will dissolve in about two weeks after it is first played, but during that time it should have helped you to gain complete mastery of Nazia.

The situation on Naze is very simple, as you will discover, but it is also very dangerous. Here is what you must do. As soon as you have learned the language, drive to the plateau two miles west of the city of Smailes, and park your car beside an abandoned granary several hundred yards from the road at midnight of any night.

In all your ventures on Naze, beware of Geean and the hunters of the city.

Leear.

By the time Mr. Slade brought the records to me, the key record had dissolved, but after listening to those that remained I am able to say without qualification that the language is a fraud, possibly an artificial creation of the three-eyed people for secret intercommunication.

I am assuming, now that a three-eyed woman has turned up, that there is more than one three-eyed freak in the world. My first reaction was that the name, Naze, might have some connection to the Nazi party, but the pronunciation of the word as given in the records, rhymes with faze and daze.

It is unfortunate that the key record was destroyed. Without such a key there can be no translation of a language which, in the ultimate issue, is nothing but a product of the imagination of three-eyed neurotics.

I am told that Mr. Slade's body was found near the city of Smailes, about a mile from the granary outhouse referred to in the letter of the woman Leear. But I know nothing about that, and did not myself see the body.

III

At first Slade sat in the car. But as midnight drew near, he climbed out and examined the granary with the probing beam of his flashlight. The bare, unpainted interior was as empty as it had been in the afternoon when he had driven out for an exploratory look.

The stubble field stretched off into darkness beyond the farthest ray of his flash. A quarter moon rode the eastern sky, and the stars shone with a pale radiance, but the resulting light failed to make his surroundings visible.

Slade glanced at his watch. And though he had known the hour was near, he felt a shock. 11:55. In five minutes, he thought shakily, *she* would come.

Not for the first time, he regretted his presence. Was he a fool, he wondered, to come here—to risk himself on an abandoned farm, where

his loudest shouts for help would merely echo mockingly from the near hills? He had a gun of course, but he knew that he would hesitate to use it.

He shook himself. She had been cunning, had the woman Leear, not naming a date for him to come. *Any* midnight, she had said. She must have known that that would work and work on the mind of the only three-eyed man of Earth. If she had named a time as well as a place, he could have made up his mind against it.

The indefiniteness nullified his resistance. Each day that passed brought the same problem: Would he go tonight? Or wouldn't he? Each day, the pro and con, with all its emotional overtones, racked his mind and body. And in the end he decided that she wouldn't have taught him the language of Naze in order to harm him on the night that he came to keep their rendezvous.

She was interested in him. What she wanted was something else again, but being what he was, a three-eyed man, he could not but be interested in her. If talking to her tonight would bring him information, then the risk was more than justified.

Here he was, for better or worse.

Slade put away his flash, and glanced at the illuminated dials of his watch. Once again, but even more tinglingly, the shock ran down his spine. It was exactly midnight.

The silence was intense. Not a sound penetrated the night. He had turned off the headlights of his car. Now, abruptly, it seemed to him that he had made a mistake. The lights should be on.

He started towards the car, and then stopped. What was the matter with him? This was no time to desert the shelter of the granary. He backed slowly until his body touched the wall. He stood there fingering his gun. He waited.

The sound that came to him there was almost not a sound at all. The air, which had been quiet, was suddenly gently agitated. But the breeze was not normal. It came from above.

From above! With a jerk, Slade looked up. But he saw nothing. Not a movement was visible against the dark, dark-blue of the sky. He felt a thrill akin to fire, a sense of the unknown stronger than anything he had ever experienced, and then—

"The important thing, Michael Slade," said the resonant, familiar

voice of Leear from the air almost directly above him, "is for you to stay alive during the next twenty-four hours while you are in the city of Naze. Be cautious, sensible, and make no unnecessary admissions about what you do or do not know. Good luck."

There was a dazzling flash of light from about a dozen feet above. Slade blinked, and snatched his gun. Then he stood tensed, and looked around wildly.

The granary was gone, and his car, and the stubble field. He was on a city street. Buildings loomed darkly all around him, spirelike shapes that reared up towards a haze of violet light which half-hid the night sky beyond. The light spread like a great curving dome from an enormously high spire in the distance.

Slade saw those details in one flashing glance. Even as he looked, understanding came of what had happened. He had been transported to the city of Naze.

At first the street seemed deserted, the silence utter. But then, swiftly, his senses began to adjust. He heard a vague sound, as if somebody had whispered to somebody else. Far along the street, a shadowed figure raced across the road, and vanished into the darkness beside a spire.

It struck Slade with a pang that his position here in the center of the street put him at a disadvantage. He began to edge carefully towards the sidewalk to the right. The roadbed was uneven, and twice he stumbled and almost fell. The greater darkness under a tree enveloped him, and he had barely reached it when there was a human screech about fifty yards away.

The sound was jarring. With a spasmodic movement, Slade flung himself onto the ground, simultaneously raising his gun. He lay very still. He waited.

It took a moment for his brain to gather together. And several seconds passed before he could locate the direction of what was now a noisy struggle. Cries and groans and muffled shouts came from the darkness. They ended abruptly, and there followed a curious silence. It was as if the assailants had been worn out by their struggle and were now resting. Or—what was more likely—they were silently and greedily engaged in searching their victim.

Slade's brain had time to catch up with his reflexes. His first thought had in it a blank, amazed quality. What had he run into? He lay quiet.

clutching his automatic tightly, and after a moment the second thought came: So this was the city of Naze.

Briefly, then, he felt overwhelmed. He thought, *How did she do it? How did she transfer me here?* There had been, he remembered, a flash of light. And instantly he was in Naze.

She must have used the same mechanical means as she had employed to transfer herself to the Earth plane. An instrument the light of which somehow affected the visual center behind each eye. There seemed no other logical explanation, and that logic, with the spaceship as an additional example, pointed to a highly developed science, that included a thorough understanding of the human nervous system.

The question was, would the effect of the light be permanent? Or would it wear off?

His thought was interrupted by a cry of rage. "Give us our share of the blood, you dirty—"

The words were shouted in the language of Naze, and Slade understood them all except the last one. It was that instantaneous, easy comprehension that thrilled him for a moment. Then the meaning penetrated also. Blood. Share of the blood.

Lying there, it seemed to Slade that he must have misunderstood. His doubt ended as another, even more furious cry came, this time from a second voice:

"The thief has a double-sized container. He got twice as much blood as the rest of us."

A third voice, obviously that of the accused, shouted, "It's a lie." The man must have recognized that his denial would not be accepted. Footsteps came racing along the street. A tall man, breathing hard, flung himself past Slade. Rushing after him, and strung out behind him, came four other men, all smaller than the first.

They charged past where Slade was lying, vague, manlike shapes that quickly vanished into the night. For nearly a minute he could hear the noise their feet made, and once there was a loud curse.

The sound faded as had the sight. There was silence. Slade did not move. He was realizing the full import of what he had seen and heard. A dead man, drained of blood, must be lying on the street a few hundred feet away. Realizing—Naze at night was a city of vampires.

A minute, two minutes, dragged by. The thought came to Slade, *But what am I supposed to do? What am I here for?*

He recalled what the woman Leear had told him just before she flashed the light at him. "The important thing, Michael Slade, is for you to remain alive during the next twenty-four hours while you are in the city of Naze."

Twenty-four hours! Slade felt a chill. Was he expected to remain in Naze for an entire day and night with no other instructions but that he remain alive? No purpose, no place to go, nothing but—this!

If only there were street lights. But he could see none in any direction. Not that it was pitch dark. An alien shiningness glowed at him, different from the night-lit cities of Earth. The sky glowed palely where the violet haze trailed down from the central tower, and lights flickered from the slitted windows of a dozen spires that he could see.

It was definitely not pitch dark, and in a way that might be to his advantage. It seemed clear that he couldn't just continue to lie where he was. And darkness would provide protection for an uneasy explorer.

He climbed to his feet, and he was about to step from under the tree when a woman called softly to him from across the street:

"Mr. Slade."

Slade froze. Then he half turned. And then he recognized that he had been addressed by name. His relief left him weak.

"Here!" he whispered loudly. "Here!"

The woman came across the street. "I'm sorry I'm late," she whispered breathlessly, "but there are so many blood seekers abroad. Follow me." Her three eyes gleamed at him. Then she turned, and headed rapidly up the street. And it was not until Slade was swinging along behind her that the startling realization came to him that this woman was not Leear.

Swiftly, he and his guide headed deeper into the city.

They climbed one of the darkest stairways Slade had ever seen, then paused before a door. The girl knocked, a measured knock. Three times slow, two fast, and then after a short interval, one.

The pause was long. While they waited, the girl said:

"Mr. Slade, we all want to thank you for coming—for the risks you are taking. We will do our best to familiarize you with Naze. Let us hope that this time the ship will be able to destroy the city."

"Uh!" said Slade.

The exclamation could have been a giveaway, but at the last instant

he had an awareness of the danger of his surprise. He choked the sound down to a contorted whisper.

There was the click of a lock. The door creaked open. Light poured out into the hallway. It revealed a heavily built woman slowly making her way to a chair.

Inside, Slade examined his surroundings. The room was both long and wide. For its size, it was scantily furnished. There were three settees and two lounges, end tables, tables, chairs and rugs. The drapes could once have belonged to his divorced wife, Miriam.

Once? A very long time ago, Slade decided after a second glance. They looked as if they had originally cost a great deal. They were so shabby now that they actually seemed out of place.

Slade let the room recede into the background of his tired mind. He walked over, and sat down in a chair, facing the older woman; but it was the younger woman he looked at.

She had paused a few feet away, and was now standing smiling at him. She was a lean, olive-complexioned girl with a proud smile.

Slade said: "Thank you for the risks *you* took."

The girl shook her head with an easy smile. "You'll be wanting to go to bed. But first I want you to meet Caldra, the Planner. Caldra, this is Slade of the ship."

There it was, definite, stated. *Of* the ship. He, Michael Slade! Leear was certainly taking a great deal for granted.

The older woman was looking at him with strange, slow eyes. The impression of slowness was so distinct that Slade looked at her sharply for the first time. Her eyes were the color of lead, her face colorless, pasty, unnatural. Lusterless, almost lifeless, she stared at him. And said in a dead slow voice:

"Mr. Slade, it is a pleasure."

It was not a pleasure to Slade. He had to strain to keep the repelled look off his face. Once, perhaps twice, before in his life, people had affected him like this, but neither of the other two had matched this creature for the unpleasant sensation they made him feel.

Slow thyroid, he analyzed. The identification made her presence more palatable to his soul. It freed his mind. Memory came of what the girl had called the other. His brain paused. Caldra, the Planner.

He relaxed slowly, and made a conscious concession. She might be very good at that. Slow brains could be extremely thorough.

His interest began to sink. The strain of his experiences weighed suddenly on him. In his teens and early twenties, he had been a night hound, a haunter of cocktail bars and clubs. At thirty he had started to go to bed at ten o'clock, much to Miriam's disgust. Midnight usually found him yawning and sleepy. And here it was—he glanced at his watch—five minutes to one. He glanced at the girl. He said:

"I can use that bed."

As the girl led him towards a corridor door, the older woman mumbled:

"Things are shaping up. Soon, the hour of decision will be upon us." Just as Slade went out of the door, she said something else with the faintest suggestion of a laugh. It sounded like, "Don't get too near him, Amor. I felt it, too."

The words seemed meaningless. But he was surprised, as the girl opened the bedroom door, to notice that the color in her cheeks was high. But all she said was:

"You're reasonably safe here. There is a very large group of us who believe in the destruction of Naze, and this is our part of the city."

In spite of his weariness, a gathering excitement kept Slade awake. He had been too tense to realize his situation. The thoughts that had come were simply the first unfoldings of his mind. But now, in bed, slowly relaxing, the tremendousness of what was happening penetrated.

He was in Naze. Outside the walls of this building was a fantastic city of another plane of existence. And tomorrow he would see that city in all its strangeness. Tomorrow!

He slept.

IV

Naze seen under a brilliant morning sun was a jarring spectacle. Slade walked beside Amor along a wide street. Shabby city, he thought, distressed. And old, oh, old!

He had realized the night before that Naze was ancient and decadent. But he hadn't grasped the extent of the disaster that had befallen the city. The buildings that he saw looked older than all his imaginings. Five hundred, eight hundred, perhaps even a thousand years had dragged by since those buildings were built.

For hundreds of thousands of days and nights, the city had rotted

under its sun. Its streets and sidewalks had borne the load of daily living. The strangest building materials could not but be worn out after such a lapse of time. And they were.

The sidewalks were almost uniformly rubble, with only here and there a patch of smooth hardness to show what the original had been like. The streets were a little better, but they, too, were largely dust packed down by the pressures that had been put on them.

Not a single vehicle was visible anywhere, only people, people and more people. Evidently, all wheel machines had long ago been worn out.

What had happened? What *could* have happened? There was, of course, the war between the city and the ship—but why? He half-turned to the girl to ask the question, then abruptly remembered that it would be unwise to show ignorance. Leear had warned him to make no admissions.

The city that surrounded him, so obvious a relic of an ancient culture, drained the fever of that fire out of him. Never anywhere had he seen so many people on the streets of a metropolis. With this difference. These people weren't going anywhere. Men and women sat on the curbs, on the sidewalks and on the roads. They seemed unmindful of individuals who brushed past them. They sat, staring vaguely into nothingness. The mindlessness of it was awful to see.

A beggar fell into step beside Slade. He held up a metal cup:

"A few drops of your blood, mister," he whined. "I'll slit your throat if you don't give it to me."

Amor's whip lashed out, and struck the ghoulish thing in the face. The blow raised a welt on the man's face. Blood trickled from the welt. "Drink your own blood!" the girl snapped.

Her color was high, Slade noticed, her face twisted with almost unnatural hatred.

"Those beasts," she said in a low, intense voice, "lurk in alleyways at night in gangs, and attack anybody who comes along. But, of course," she broke off, "you know all about that."

Slade made no comment. It was true that he knew of the night gangs, but what he didn't know would fill a book.

The continuing reality tore his mind from that very personal problem. The streets swarmed with people *who had nothing to do.* And

again, and again and again, fingers plucked at Slade's sleeve, and avid voices whimpered:

"Your blood is strong, mister. You can spare a little, or else—"

Often and often, it was a woman's face that leered up at him.

Slade was silent. He was so appalled he could have spoken only with difficulty. He looked down side street after street, boiling with lecherous beings; and he saw for the first time in his life what utter depravity was possible to the human animal.

This city must not continue to exist. It was clear now why Leear had lured him into the city. She wanted him to see, and she must believe the actuality would end any doubts in his mind. Doubts, for instance, about the reasons for the immeasurably horrible conditions—unquestionably due to the war between the ship and the city. Understanding the origin of a plague was a side issue.

The plague itself must be wiped out.

He had no doubts; so great was his horror. He felt sick with an absolute dismay. This, he thought, going on day after day, year after year, through centuries. It mustn't. The girl was speaking:

"For a while we thought if we could get the chemicalized cups away from them, we could end the blood craze. But—"

She stopped; she shrugged, finished: "Of course you know all about that. Except in rare cases, depravity only sinks to new depths; it does not rise."

There was nothing to say to that. It was easy to see that his NOT knowing "all about that" was going to be a handicap to his understanding of the details of hell. He didn't really need the details though; the overall hell was enough.

End it! Destroy it! Help the ship if he could, help these fifth columnists. But destroy Naze.

He grew calmer. He analyzed her words. Chemicalized cups! Then it wasn't the blood itself, but some chemical in the metal of the cup, that made it so intoxicatingly attractive.

Removal of the cup apparently had channeled the craving into something worse. What? Well, he was supposed to know.

Slade smiled wearily. "Let's go back," he said. "I've had enough for today."

The early part of the lunch was eaten in silence. Slade ate, thinking

about the city, the ship and the cavemen, and of his own part in the affair. In a way he now knew the essentials of the situation. He had seen the ship, and he was seeing the city.

The question was, just what was he supposed to do? He realized abruptly that Caldra, the slow, was about to speak.

The woman was laying down her fork. That movement alone required many seconds. Then she lifted her head. It seemed to Slade that it took her eyes an unnaturally long time to focus upon him.

The next step was even more prolonged. She opened her mouth, sat considering her first sentence, and finally began to articulate the syllables. Over a period that seemed longer than it was, she said:

"Tonight, we raid Geean's central palace. Our forces can guarantee to get you to the fortieth level as agreed. The apparatus Leear asked for is already there, ready to ease you out of the window, so that you can focus your dissembler onto the controls of the barrier. You no doubt saw for yourself when you were out this morning that they are located at about the ninetieth level.

"We assume, of course, that the ship will rush in the moment the barrier is down."

Long before her measured words reached their end, Slade had grasped their import. He sat motionless, eyes half closed, startled. Tonight. But that was ridiculous. He couldn't be expected to rush into an attack as blindly as that.

His opinion of Leear went down a million miles. What was a dissembler anyway? Surely, he wasn't expected to learn how to operate an intricate mechanism during the heat of a battle. His consternation reached a peak as Caldra fell silent, and looked at him expectantly. Amor, too, he saw, was watching him with eager anticipation.

Slade parted his lips, and then closed them again, as another, greater realization struck him. The realization that he had been given an immense amount of information. It was all by implication, but the import was unmistakable.

The haze of light he had seen the night before, radiating from the skyscraper central tower—and which he recalled suddenly had been vaguely visible during his morning walk as a faint mist—that was the barrier. What kind of a barrier? Apparently, a barrier strong enough to keep the spaceship at bay. A barrier of energies potent beyond anything on Earth.

But that meant the city was under siege, and—judging from the decay—had been for hundreds of years.

Slade's mind poised. "This," he told himself, "is ridiculous. How would they live? Where would they get their food? They can't possibly be living on each other's blood."

He stared down at his plate, but there was very little left. The remnant looked like a vegetable, though it was covered by a sauce or gravy that hid the details. He looked up, a question about the food quivering in his throat—and realized that this was no time for such things. If he was going to prevent a major disaster, he had better say something, and fast. Before he could speak, Amor said:

"One bold surprise attack and"—she smiled with a savage excitement—"finish!"

For a moment, the play of emotions across her face held Slade's attention. She was quite a deadly creature herself, this tall girl who carried a whip for the vampires of Naze. It was the old story of environment of course. The mind shaped by its physical climate, and in turn shaping the body and the expression of the face, and setting fast the capabilities of the senses.

For the first time it struck him that, if he committed himself to this plane of Earth, here was a sample of the kind of girl he would eventually marry. He looked at her with interest, prepared to pursue the thought further. And then, once more he realized that his mind was striving to escape from its only immediate problem, the attack. Tonight! He said:

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that the ship will not be here tonight."

Amor was on her feet, her eyes widening. "But all our plans!" she gasped.

She seemed overcome. She sat down. Beside her, Caldra emerged from her stupor, and showed that Slade's words had finally penetrated.

"No ship!"

Slade said, "The ship was to signal me this morning." He felt as if he were sweating, but it was a mental sensation, not a physical one. He went on. "There was no signal."

It was not bad, he realized, for ad lib. He relaxed, in spite of not having solved his basic problem. He watched Amor head for the door. She paused on the threshold.

"I'll have to call off the attack."

The door banged behind her, leaving, after a moment, silence.

Amor having failed to turn up, Caldra and Slade ate dinner shortly before dark.

It was late when Amor came in. She slumped into her chair, and began to pick absently at the food that Caldra set before her. Several times Slade caught her looking at him from under her lashes with speculation. And with something else. He couldn't quite decide what.

Slade decided not to let that disturb him. He walked over to the great window of the living room. He was aware of Amor joining him after a while, but she said nothing; and so he, too, held his peace. He looked out at Naze.

Shadowed Naze, night enveloped. Seen from the spire window, the city drifted quietly into darkness. It seemed almost to glide into the shadows that crept in from the east.

Slade gazed and gazed. At last except for the flickering lights and the almost invisible barrier, the darkness was complete.

Realizations came: His was surely the strangest adventure in the history of the human nervous system. Born in the foothills of western United States, brought up on a farm, quickly successful as a broker in a small western city. And now here! Here in this dark, doomed city of a planet the civilization of which was in desperate straits.

And yet it was not an alien planet; simply another plane revealed to his brain and body because he had three eyes instead of two.

The thrill of excitement that came was connected with his companion. She stood beside him, a woman of that world, young and strong, perhaps still unspoken for by any man.

It was possible. He was sure of that. The marriage state was almost meaningless under present conditions.

It was some time since he had given serious thought to the subject of women. Now, he was fairly easy prey. During the afternoon he had thought of Amor in a very possessive fashion, and his previous realization—that IF he stayed, he would have to marry a girl of this world—had sharpened.

It was possible that there would be other women on this plane of existence more attractive than she was, but they were far away.

Slade said: "Amor."

No answer.

"Amor, what are you planning to do afterwards?"

The girl stirred. "I shall live in a cave, of course. That is what we must all do."

Slade hesitated, torn from his line of approach by the implications of her words—*Must* all do! Why? It had not struck him before that Amor and her group accepted the idea of a primitive existence.

He remembered that in a kind of a way, he was trying to make a girl.

"Amor."

"Slade."

She seemed not to have heard him, for her tone was not an answer, and showed no awareness that he had spoken.

Slade said, "What is it?"

"This will sound terrible to you, but I was once a blood drinker."

It seemed a futile confession. It brought no picture at first; the words themselves made him uneasy, however.

"And so was Caldra. And everybody. I don't think I'm exaggerating. There's never been anything like it."

A picture began to come. And thoughts. Slade licked his suddenly dry lips, repelled.

And still he had no idea what she was getting at.

"It was easier for me to break off," the girl said, "and to stay off—until today . . . last night. Slade," her voice was tiny, "you have strong blood. I felt it all day."

Abruptly, he knew where she was heading. He thought of the men and women she had lashed with her whip that morning. In a twisted fashion, those blows had been aimed at her own craving.

"You can't imagine," Amor was saying, "what a shock it was to Caldra and me when you said the attack was not tonight. It meant you would be around at least another day. Slade, that was terribly unfair. Leear knew our situation only too well."

The repulsion was greater. It seemed to Slade that in another moment he would be sick. He said in a low voice:

"You want some of my blood."

"Just a little." Her tone had the faintest whine in it. Enough to make vivid a picture of her begging on the streets. Slade felt mentally nauseated.

The thought came that he had no business making any remarks. But he was emotionally past that stage of common sense. This was the girl he had tentatively intended to offer marriage. He said harshly: "And you were the one who used a whip on the others this morning."

In the darkness of the room, he heard the sharp intake of her breath. There was a long silence. Then she turned, and her body was a slim, shadowed shape that disappeared into a corridor towards her bedroom.

And so the night that was to be long began.

▼

After several hours, Slade still couldn't sleep. He had been unfair to somebody he liked; and it was disturbing.

She had rescued him from almost death, restored his health; and, surely, surely, he could spare her a little of his blood. Out of all the people in this fantastic city, she and her group had fought hardest against the craving that had destroyed the soul of Naze.

It must have been a fight to make the very gods take pity. But he had had none. He, supermoralist Michael Slade, the perfect man, had cast stones and created pain.

Actually, the true explanation was worse than that, rooted as it was in his own physical desires. And, besides, it was possible that his blood did *feel* stronger to people who were aware of such things.

In the morning, he would give Amor AND Caldra a half cup of blood. And then, somehow, he must get out of this city, back to Earth if possible, but out in some way. It was already after midnight, and clear, therefore, that the end of the twenty-four-hour period, which Leear had mentioned, would not automatically return him to the vicinity of his car, near the city of Smailes.

Why, if it meant nothing, had she mentioned a time limit? He dozed, still thinking about that. And wakened to the realization that someone was in the room.

He lay rigid, striving to penetrate the darkness. The fear that pressed on him was the ancient fear of a man in a hostile land being stalked in the blackness. His straining eyes caught a movement against the silhouetting wall, a shadowy figure.

A woman. Amor. The identification brought a measure of pity.

Poor girl! What deadly hunger that desire for blood was. In a blurred fashion, he had had in the back of his mind an intention of using a cup to taste his own blood. But her coming under such desperate circumstances ended that intention for the time being. He was only a normal human being. He couldn't afford to be caught in the toils of so potent a drug.

He made an effort to sit up. And couldn't. He was held down by straps.

He lay back, the first annoyance sharpening his temper. It was all very well to feel sorry for her, but this was a pretty raw stunt she was pulling.

He parted his lips to say something scathing. He didn't say it. Memory came that this girl was in a bad way. Let her have her blood.

He wouldn't say a word. In the morning he would pretend that nothing had happened. The determination gave him a temporary satisfaction.

In the darkness, the vague movement continued. The girl seemed to be in no hurry. Just as Slade's impatience reached the vanishing point, a thin needle of light pointed down at his left arm. Almost simultaneously a hand came into view. It held a syringe, which it inserted deftly into the largest visible vein. Slade watched, interested, as the blood drew up darkly into the transparent body of the instrument.

The seconds slid by, and still the avid needle strained at him. Slade thought of the eeriness of what was happening, an Earthman in a strange world being bled by a likable vampire girl in the secret dead of night.

The picture faded with the passing seconds, too many seconds. Slade said gently:

"Don't you think that's enough?"

For several moments after his words broke the silence, the syringe held steady; and there was no sound. At last, the hand and the syringe jerked slightly in surprise.

It was the time gap between his speech and her reaction that brought to Slade his first understanding of the truth. His gaze fixed for the first time on the hand holding the instrument. It was hard to see in the reflections from that narrow band of light. But seeable it was. And recognizable.

It was a woman's hand. Slade sighed as he stared at it. Here was one

more proof that the mind created its own illusions. He, who had had so much experience with that reality, whose very presence in the universe of the three-eyed was a living evidence of the importance of mind over matter, still continued to be fooled.

His mind had jumped to the conclusion that it was Amor who had come to his room. When the hand had first come into the light, minutes ago, he had noticed nothing unusual. Now he did.

It was a woman's hand all right, but rather worn. And not young looking at all. How he could have mistaken it even in the reflected light, was a puzzle.

This was Caldra the mysterious, Caldra the Planner, Caldra who, apparently, was now breaking her blood fast. The realization came to Slade that he was participating in a personal tragedy. A woman whose craving for blood had once nearly destroyed her was drinking blood again.

He was aware of the syringe being withdrawn from his arm. The light winked out. A pause. The sound of thick liquid squirting heavily into a container came next, and then once more silence.

Slade pictured the hand slowly raising the cup towards the fumbling lips. His timing was perfect. As his mental picture of her hand reached her lips, there came an audible gulping.

The sound made Slade a little sick. But pity came too. The emotion died, as fingers touched the bed. He thought with a scowl: More?

But it was the straps that let go their constricting hold on his chest and arms. Footsteps shuffled towards the door, which closed softly.

Silence settled. After a little, Slade slept. When he wakened, a great paw was pressing down on his mouth, and a beast as big as a bear, but with oddly catlike features, was looming over him. Its strong, big, hairy body was illumined by a light held by men in uniform.

Other uniformed men were holding Slade's arms and legs. And he had a dismaying glimpse of still more men in the corridor outside the bedroom.

The animal's great paw withdrew from his face. He was lifted, and carried. There was a light in the living room. He saw Caldra lying face down on the floor, a knife driven to the hilt into her back.

Slade had a horrible, empty sensation. Amor! What about Amor?

It was that thought that must have done it. Under him, the floor dis-

solved as if it were made of nothingness. He fell about fifteen feet, and struck hard. He lay dizzily for more than a minute before understanding came.

He raised himself slowly, scratching his hands on the frozen stubble of a wheat field. About two miles to the west the lights of the city of Smailes blazoned the night sky. Slade climbed to his feet, and headed for the granary where he had left his car. It was still there, silent and lightless.

He waited a few minutes, but there was no sign of Leear. Tired though he was, he drove all the rest of that night, and part of the next morning. It was 11:00 a.m. when he turned up his private drive.

A letter was in the mailbox, in the familiar, masculine handwriting of Leear. Slade frowned at it, then tore it open. It read:

Dear Michael Slade:

Now you know. You have seen Naze. You must have wondered why nothing happened at the exact end of the twenty-four hours. Nothing could happen until after that time, and then only if you received a sufficiently strong shock.

This shock, of course, was provided when one of the women came in and attempted to obtain some of your blood. It was regrettable that such a situation had to be forced, but there was no alternative.

It was unfortunate, too, that I had to let the group in Naze think that there would be an attack. They have no conception of the kind of man they are fighting. Against the immortal Geean, any plan of theirs would fail automatically. Their inability to understand the nature and strength of the enemy is proved by the fact that they accepted without question that the barrier could be destroyed by an attack with a so-called dissembler on a protuberance at the ninetieth floor of the central tower of Geean.

There is no such instrument as a dissembler, and the protuberance on the tower is a radiator. Geean will never be defeated except by an attack into the heart of his stronghold. Such an attack cannot be made without your help, and this time you must come by yourself, as the device which I used beside the granary has only temporary effects.

Do not wait too long.

Leear.

In the daytime, he read and remained within the limits of his yard. At night, hat pulled low over his third eye, head hunched down into the collar of his overcoat, he walked the frozen streets. Slowly, the fever went out of him, and he became grimly sardonic in his attitude to what had happened.

"I am not," he decided, "the stuff of which heroes are made. And I have no desire to get killed in the war between Naze and the ship."

He had better adjust himself to the idea of remaining on this earth.

The half decision made it possible for him to consider Leear's letter from a less emotional viewpoint than when he had first read it. The rereading after three weeks was even more interesting than he had expected, now that his lips did not tighten with anger at the ruthless way Leear had precipitated him into Naze, and so, callously, caused the death of Amor and Caldra.

The letter was basically far less irritating than he had thought. And it certainly lacked the commanding tone that he somehow expected from her. In addition, her frank admission that his help was necessary mollified Slade tremendously.

He was vaguely pleased, too, that she had underestimated him. Her analysis of the kind of shock that would send him back to Earth had been wrong. Caldra coming for blood had scarcely ruffled his nerves. And it had taken the sight of her dead body and a mental picture of Amor similarly murdered to affect him.

After three weeks, he felt himself immune to shock. Caldra and Amor began to seem just a little unreal, like figments of a dream. Slade knew that he had come a long way out of a dangerous mental state when he could think of Amor and feel satiric about his impulse to ask her to marry him.

He did not feel contemptuous of the emotions involved. They were human basics, and it struck him that it might be a sound idea to marry again right here on Earth. If he could persuade Miriam to come and live with him again, that would be a decisive act not easily overthrown by any sudden impulse to rush off to that other plane of existence.

He must resume old relationships, return to a normal Earth existence.

It was easier decided than done. One night, while he was still planning the proper approach to make to Miriam, he met two friends of his business days. They nodded and hurried past, and stopped only when he turned and called after them. The conversation that followed was one of those lame, horrible affairs but Slade was persistent. It seemed to him in his dogged frame of mind that if he was going to live on Earth, he had to have friends and a wife. Those were the concomi-

tants of a sane existence, and he knew better than even to attempt to do without them.

Slade did not enjoy the conversation any more than the two men. They were by turns uneasy, jocular, unhappily silent, eager to impart information, and, finally, they hurried off with a "Glad to have met you, Mike, but we're late now for an engagement. Be seeing you."

Slade walked home his lips curling ironically, but there was a vague chill in his backbone. He had learned, among other things, that Miriam had had a "new" boy friend for several months, and there was something strangely final about that fact. As if his last escape route was closing inexorably.

He did not give up so easily. He phoned Miriam the next day, and the day after that, and each day for the week following. Each time her maid said, "Who is calling?" Then, "Miss Crenshaw does not care to speak to you."

Slade wrote her a letter, in which he said, "After all I can have the eye covered with grafted skin." He followed up the letter with a personal visit. But Miriam was "out."

It was fairly ultimate. Particularly when a detective called the next day, and asked him to cease his "persecution" of his former wife. The officer was considerably impressed by the beautiful residence, but he was a man who knew his duty. "We have received a complaint, y'understand. We'll have to take action if it continues, y'understand?"

Slade understood. His little dream was over.

STATEMENT MADE TO CORONER'S JURY BY WILFRED STANTON

I was first employed by Michael Slade as a houseman about five years ago. I was with him, with only a brief holiday, throughout the past year.

My employer was away from home several times during that period. He always seemed in an upset condition after each such absence, but he did not take me into his confidence. Before his final departure, I noticed a new air of decisiveness about him, as if he had finally made up his mind about something after a long uncertainty. He bought a second automatic, a match to the one he already had, and a great deal of ammunition for both weapons. He also purchased other items, but I did not see what was in the packages that arrived for him. He read almost continuously. I remember one book dealt with metallurgy, another was a volume on physics, and a third about the new rocket ships.

All this time, too, he was sitting out in the yard with his eye charts. These exercises were unusual in that he wore a light durable hunting suit made of waterproof materials, which he had had made. In addition he carried two automatics, a hunting knife and a pouch of ammunition. His pockets also seemed to be stuffed, but I don't know what was in them.

Mr. Slade was aware of my awareness of the unusualness of this get-up, and he seemed amused at my anxiety. One day, he told me not to be alarmed if he went away without warning.

It was the day after that that I called him for lunch, and he was gone. His disappearance was unusual in that the chair and the charts were just as he had left them, and particularly unusual in that there was snow on the ground, and his tracks should have been visible leading out of the yard. I saw no tracks that would indicate a departure.

I can only say that I was not surprised when Mr. Slade's dead body was discovered last week two hundred miles from here. He was obviously expecting something to happen. And it did.

VI

The change this time was like the click of a camera shutter. He felt his eyes working, then his house vanished, and then—

It was raining, a warm but heavy rain. The water came down on the marsh near the caves in a multitude of slanting drops, like millions of tiny knives cutting the surface. Under that blurring curtain of water, the landscape looked wilder, less civilized. Its very green lusciousness made it primitive, but the green was there, ornamental and gorgeous.

Slade, who had started to mull over the problem of rain in one plane of existence and snow in another, under the same sun, felt a warm, wet trickle of water run down inside the collar of his waterproof suit. It didn't bother him, but it took his mind off of the why of the rain. He stepped automatically under the overhanging branch of a nearby tree, and from its uncertain shelter—the water poured from it—peered up at the ledge.

Some of the excitement died out of him. The hill looked lifeless. All the fires were out, and not a human being was in sight. It was the rain, of course. They'd be inside the caves.

Since he had no intention of climbing to the ledge until he had been discovered—spears and knives might flash just a little too swiftly if he surprised them in their caves—his problem was to find shelter. He constructed himself a crude house of dead branches overlaid with large, fronded leaves. Then he scraped away a heavy layer of dead wet leaves,

and was pleasantly surprised to find that the ground underneath was comparatively dry.

He slept fitfully throughout the afternoon and evening. During the night he was awake for a long time. Just before he finally slept, he thought sharply, "I'll have to wake up before they do."

When he opened his eyes, the sun was shining from a blue sky. And several three-eyed men were kneeling around the open end of his shelter. Beyond them were other men, and in the farther background, women and children.

Very slowly, Slade sat up. He pushed the shelter over on its side, and climbed to his feet, but that, too, was an automatic movement. The convulsive thought came that the strain inside his head and in his muscles would produce organic tensions strong enough to precipitate him back to the United States.

But nothing happened. The people and the marsh and the cave hill remained in his vision as steady as sanity itself. He was welded to this plane of existence as if he had been born here.

It was not until that thought had come and gone that he noticed none of the men carried arms of any description. The relief that came was almost as tremendous as had been the first shock. Before he could speak, one of the men nearest him said gently:

"Careful. You're not completely stable yet."

The man reached forward and placed his palm over Slade's center eye. The movement was too unexpected for it to be resisted. The delayed reaction, when it finally came, was half-hearted. Slade started to take a step backwards, and then, realizing the meaning of what was happening, he stopped in amazement.

These people knew that he was not of this plane. *And they knew why.* The next thought followed hard on the first:

The cave dwellers were NOT primitives.

It was too big an idea to grasp all in one instant, particularly as the man who had touched his forehead now stepped back with a smile, and said:

"I think you will be all right."

Slade hadn't noticed the fellow's voice before. Now, he did. It was calm and melodic, without harshness, the words so easily spoken that they were like a flow of music produced by a master.

That fact, also, held his mind only a moment. He stood looking

around him at the men and at the women, and his relief grew second by second. They were smiling, friendly; they were good-looking and alert, a high physical and mental type. Slade allowed himself a flashing memory of the degenerate blood addicts of the city of Naze, and comprehended with finality that, whatever was the basic reason for the deadly siege of the city by the ship of Leear, these clean and decent-looking cave dwellers were evidence in favor of the ship.

He realized that it was time he said something. He said, "Thank you. I am a friend. My name is Michael Slade."

The tall, eagle-eyed man who had already spoken nodded. "My name," he said, "is Danbar."

They shook hands. It was so simply, so generously done that Slade was not sure then or ever afterwards as to whether shaking hands was a common custom among these people. Or whether Danbar had instantaneously and without hesitation responded to the habits of a stranger.

As their hands separated, Slade noted for the first time that the man was inches taller than himself, and marvelously strong-looking. He had a lean, handsome face. Except for his extra eye, he would have been good-looking in any group of two-eyed human beings. He seemed about thirty years old.

He smiled. He took Slade's arm, and led him to another man, a splendid-looking chap who had been watching the proceedings from the background.

Danbar indicated the other. "Malenkens," he said.

The way he said it made it sound a distinctive and important name. And, looking at the man, Slade did not doubt but that he was being introduced to one of the leaders of the tribe. With Malenkens, too, the handshake was warm, but his smile was sterner, more aloof.

Danbar said, "You can meet the others later. Now, let us return to the ledge for breakfast."

Contact was established as easy as that.

The winding path that led up to the caves was made of cement steps flanked by ornamental shrubs. A cement sidewalk ran along the entire length of the ledge, with smaller sidewalks leading into the caves. In between the sidewalks, green, velvety grass grew in neat plots that could only have been planned by skillful gardeners.

Slade, pausing before the first cave, peered into an interior at least

as uncavelike as what he had already seen. The floor was of cement, but it was covered with throw rugs. The walls and ceiling were plastered over a base of cement. The chairs, tables and bunks that he could see were of unpainted wood, but they were well-designed and had been sandpapered to a smooth polish. The overall result was astonishingly modern.

Danbar touched Slade's arm, and motioned him to follow Malenkens, who was proceeding along the ledge. As he walked, Slade found himself surreptitiously looking for Leear. He was not greatly surprised when he failed to locate her, but neither did he accept her absence as final. She had been here once. There was no reason why she should not come back. And, besides, she must know that this would be his point of entry into the three-eyed world.

Malenkens stopped, and spoke for the first time. "In here," he said.

The cave was a structural duplicate of the one into which Slade had peered. The three men sat down in chairs, and Malenkens spoke again.

"Slade," he said, "we have been estimating your situation from the time you wakened, and in my judgment it will take about six years to adjust the rhythm of your life to our group. That takes into account your untrained resistance, and the fact that it will probably require several months for you to help Leear destroy the barrier of Naze and Geean. And, of course, it assumes that you will not be killed or dangerously injured."

He added, "I am not trying to alarm you. I am merely stating the facts as I see them. Now, Danbar will take over."

Danbar did not move, but continued to sit in his chair. He looked at Slade speculatively. "You will be wondering," he said, "what Malenkens was talking about. Watch."

He vanished.

For a minute, Slade sat where he was. He had no particular thoughts, though the memory came that, when Leear had hovered above him near the granary, he had not been able to see her against the stars. She, too, must have been invisible.

At the end of the minute, it struck him that perhaps he was expected to do something. He stood up, bent over Danbar's chair, and gingerly moved his arm through the space where Danbar had been sitting. There was no resistance to the movement. He glanced over at Malenkens, but the man did not look up.

Slade sat down again, heavily this time, trembling a little. There was no reason at all why Danbar, having rendered himself invisible, had not climbed to his feet and walked in a leisurely fashion to the cave entrance, or perhaps he was standing beside his chair, watching his guest's reaction. There was no reason why he shouldn't have done one of those things, but Slade had the vaguely sinking conviction that Danbar had done nothing of the kind, and that in fact he was still sitting in the chair.

Primitives, Slade thought. *And I believe they were primitives.*

These people had learned the innermost secrets of the human nervous system. They were so far ahead of their two-eyed cousins that comparison seemed almost ridiculous. Or wait a minute—what was it Malenkens had said? "*. . . It will take you about six years to adjust the rhythm of your life to our group—*"

The first burning excitement stirred Slade. Did he mean that at the end of six years he, too, might be able to render himself invisible at will? Or did he mean—?

Slade pressed the thought back into his mind. He forced himself to lean back in his chair. He parted his lips to speak to Malenkens, then closed them again. The man was looking the other way. The moments dragged, and there was no sign of Danbar. His absence began to be disturbing. For the second time the possibility occurred to Slade that he was expected to do something.

He stood up uncertainly. On a sudden impulse he seated himself in Danbar's chair. That didn't last long. The thought came that it would be a very humorless situation if the man chose to materialize in the chair.

Slade walked to the entrance of the cave on the doubtful expectation that Danbar would be outside. The ledge was a veritable hive of activity, fires burning brightly, women stirring caldrons, children already becoming nuisances with their games and noise. But of Danbar there was no sign.

Slade stood for a moment peering out over the marsh. The view was gorgeous beyond all imagination. The water gleamed in the sun, and it was alive with colorful growth. Far out, he caught a glimpse of birds fluttering, and he thought with a thrill: Three-eyed birds! In the distance beyond the marsh trees reared to amazing heights, and he could

see the haze of mounting hills beyond. Everywhere was the green of perpetual summer.

Slade turned back into the cavern, quivering inside. What a wonderful plane of Earth he was on. Never, surely, would he have the slightest desire to return whence he had come.

There was, of course, the problem of Naze— That brought Slade back to reality with a start. He saw that Danbar had still not rematerialized. He thought, "Invisibility? If I had to figure out some way of making myself invisible, knowing what I do now about the art of seeing, I would try to disturb in some way the vision centers of those who were looking at me. Perfect vision is possible only when the mind is relaxed. Therefore I would try to tense their minds in some way."

The rationalization brought a sudden startled thought. Why, of course. He *was* expected to do something. He drew a deep, slow breath, and let it out with a sighing sound, simultaneously letting all his muscles go lax. The eye specialist, Dr. McIver, had always maintained that the human body could relax with one breath.

In that instant Slade proved it. As he started to draw his second breath, Danbar reappeared in his chair. The man looked up earnestly at Slade.

"Very good, my friend. I was hoping that you would manage to figure that out for yourself." He went on, "You have experienced for yourself one of the basic truths of the human nervous system. During the next few months you will be taught the ultimate secrets of relaxation, relaxation so complete that, even in the final issue, there is no limit to the control that can be exercised over it. But now—"

He stood up, smiling. "Let us," he said, "take our chairs outside and have breakfast."

Slade followed the two men out into the brilliant sun.

VII

On the thirty-second day of his stay with the tribe, Slade lay at ease on a knoll above the marsh. From his position, he could see the caves about a mile away. It was a marvelous day. It had rained a little in the morning, but now the sky was as clear and blue as could be. Before him, in a gardenlike vista, the green, green grass and shrubbery still

sparkled with raindrops that hung heavy on every blade and sprig and leaf and branch.

The whole world around him was as wonderful as ever, and yet Slade was conscious of dissatisfaction. "I'm an active person," he thought. "My nerves are still afflicted with the neurotic desire to do things."

He even had an impulse pushing at him. That odd metal device that he had found half-buried in the ground near his farm the night he had seen Leear in a shadowed corridor of an old spaceship—it would be interesting to go and get it, and examine it.

He did not move. He had to admit that the previous month had, in its way, been exciting. The world of relaxation was an inward world of unending discovery. His knowledge began with the muscles, lectures about and exercises with. Exercises? It was not exactly the right word for what he was doing, Slade had decided, but he continued to use it for want of a better. Exercise suggested physical activity, but the relaxation exercises were the reverse of movement. They were stillness. They were inhalation and exhalation as effortlessly as possible. They were long minutes of lying upon carefully arranged pillows while the mind concentrated gently upon certain muscles, and always the message his brain sent was: "Let go, let go, let go."

Gradually, over the weeks, he learned the basic philosophy behind the relaxation. A correct posture, and good breathing habits. When at fault, those two things alone caused tension repercussions that affected the entire body. Tension made for bad vision and poor hearing. Tension was responsible for quick fatigue, for lack of strength and for narcotic cravings. Tension caused the kidneys to inject a fluid into the blood which caused high blood pressure, melancholy and a negative attitude towards life. Tension subtly changed the acid content of the digestive fluids. Tension was, literally, the devil of the nervous system, but getting rid of it was merely the first, preliminary step to the control of the body.

The second phase was normalization of the nerves. Every nerve, individually and collectively, was capable of a positive or negative action. It could pass an impulse to seek another path to the brain. It was doubtful if more than five percent of an ordinary person's nerve impulses followed direct routes. It was true, of course, that many of the detours were used over and over again, but it was no justification for a

bad habit to point out that it was repeated endlessly, particularly when the cumulative results were *un*sanity, early old age and a confused mind.

The entire ninety-five percent of misdirected nervous energy had to be re-channeled along direct routes and this was done by concentrating on key nerve paths. In every case, positive training was necessary. As with muscular relaxation, one could not just seek out a lazy environment and take it easy. Definite things had to be done. Muscles consistently relaxed by a system eventually stayed relaxed. Nerves repeatedly told to establish a direct channel, with a picture of that channel clearly visualized, did eventually make the exact channel demanded.

Nerve control led to the third or molecular phase, about which, when Slade had asked him, Danbar merely said, "You will see. You will see."

Lying there on the knoll above the marsh, it seemed to Slade that he knew the muscular relaxation exercises sufficiently well to be able to do them for a short time without an instructor standing by. He should be able to walk to the area where his farm existed on the Earth plane, and get the machine buried in the ground there.

He climbed to his feet with sudden decision. *I'll ask Danbar or Malenkens,* he thought.

Danbar, to whom Slade made the request, after the evening exercises, looked disturbed. Then he glanced questioningly at Malenkens. It was the latter who said:

"Leear told us you would be restless." He paused, frowning. Then he looked at Slade from under lowered lashes. "I've decided to be fairly frank with you, Slade. We are training you to help Leear against Naze. You must not think that we are parties to her plan. We merely exercise certain restraints upon her. You may wonder what that means, so I will explain.

"It is Leear's intention," he went on, "to involve you again in Naze. We have no power to prevent her from doing that, nor actually do we want to. Somehow, Geean must be killed, and the people of Naze freed. According to Leear, only you can do this, how she has never explained.

"What we did was to delay her plans until you could be given at least preliminary training in our marvelous system."

He finished quietly, "I think you will agree that, under these circum-

stances, you would be wise not to involve yourself in minor side issues."

Slade was shocked. The more he thought about it the greater grew his shock. It was curious but, though he had not for a minute forgotten Leear or Naze—incredible Naze—somehow the long sweet month of pastoral existence had blurred the darker potentialities of that memory.

Now, here it was, plainly stated. On occasion in his past life, he had had a reputation for facing facts with a brutal honesty, and his comparisons had startled his business associates. That was the way he finally looked at his present position. The comparison that occurred to him was that he was like a pig being fatted for the slaughter.

He spent the night, narrow-eyed, sleeping fitfully, and in a fury every time he woke up. By morning his mind was made up.

So Malenkens and the others had only persuaded Leear with difficulty to delay putting him immediately in jeopardy. Well, that was just fine. He owed her nothing anyway but a punch in the nose for being indirectly responsible for the death of Amor and Caldra.

Since her intention was to use him without so much as a by your leave, his purpose could only be to prevent her by every possible means from involving him.

The determination gave him considerable satisfaction until near morning, when it occurred to him that it might not be any too easy to prevent her machinations. The trouble was he knew so little, so desperately little. He had not the faintest idea what methods might be available to these people who knew the innermost secrets of the human nervous system, and in addition had a spaceship loaded with gadgets, one at least of which was capable of transmitting material objects from this plane to the Earth plane and back again.

The new possibilities calmed him. He would have to be very clever indeed to ensure that she didn't get him into Naze again. And anger would be his poorest asset in carrying out that purpose.

At breakfast time, he emerged from his cave, seated himself beside Malenkens, and said:

"I think it's time that I find out something about the history behind the war between the ship and the city."

Malenkens said, "I see that you have been thinking of what I told you last night." Slade waited, and Malenkens went on, "I do not regret

having said it, but I cannot say more. We promised Leear that we would let her tell you the entire story."

"Then tell me," said Slade savagely, "who is Leear?"

"She is one of the silver belts."

"One of the what?"

Malenkens was grave. "Her personal plans for you would suffer a psychological defeat if I told you more. You must wait. I can say this. If you survive the destruction of Naze, the universe will be yours for the taking."

Temporarily that silenced Slade. Coming from Malenkens, those were momentous words. They brought his first sense of exhilaration at the greatness of the adventure into which his destiny had brought him.

The exhilaration was brief. The tremendousness of the reward implied by Malenkens suggested an enormous compensating sacrifice. Slade stiffened slowly. He disliked the thought of being on an unfriendly basis with these kindly people, but it was time he stated his position without equivocation.

He did so, pretty much as he had already decided. No co-operation with Leear until he was good and ready. It was ridiculous for her to assume that a man could be shoved blindly into a situation, again and again, and told to get out as best he could, each time without having more than a sketchy idea as to what was going on. He for one refused to have anything to do with such a plan. And if he ever went in, it would be on the basis of full information with his eyes wide open.

"You will have to kill a man," said Malenkens in a strangely drab voice. "You have never killed a human being. It is Leear's unalterable conviction that you could not bring yourself to commit a cold-blooded murder, and that only under the stress of violent danger could you be nerved to kill. Such is her opinion, and, having observed you for an entire moon period, I agree with her."

"Thanks," said Slade dryly. "I'm still not interested."

He finished his meal in silence. He felt uncertain as to just what his position was with the tribe, but he decided in the end that what had happened was not a breakup. He would remain for a while at least, and make his plans on the basis of careful thought. There was no use rushing off, half cocked.

He attended his morning relaxation exercises as usual.

During the second month, the tempo of his life seemed faster to

Slade. He realized what it was. He was more alert, more wary, eager to learn things. He kept a watchful eye on the men, and slept with a gun under his pillow.

Towards the end of the month, it struck him that no one in the tribe had ever seen the automatic in action. And that it might be a good idea to fire one of his precious bullets as a sort of a deterrent. He hesitated about that, because even one bullet might be important in a crisis. And yet, it seemed clear that Leear would never get him into Naze against his will unless male members of the tribe trussed him up, and gave him into her power.

It was a month of several discoveries. He had been wondering about the animal life of this plane. "It's there," Malenkens assured him, with an odd smile. "It all depends on whether they decide to find out your reaction to seeing them."

That didn't quite make sense, but over a period of four weeks he had glimpses. And, finally, every time, the glimpse revealed the animal watching *him*. There was a tiny, dark creature too fast for a clear picture to form of its shape. A long, slim, spotted beast, too thin to be well muscled, and resembling a dog, trotted off disdainfully into the brush, after looking Slade over with an aloof eye. There was a horselike beast that peered at him thoughtfully for several seconds, and then galloped off snorting. And then, finally, there was a really shocking meeting with an animal.

Slade was walking along in a pathless valley adjoining the valley of the caves when a chance glance to the rear revealed a beast bigger than himself trotting along not more than ten yeards behind him. It had a head that had both cat and bear features, and its body was long, and sleek, and grayish-brown.

It was the same type of beast that had bent over him that night in Caldra's and Amor's apartment.

Slade felt a thrill as sharp as fear, and snatched at his automatic. The animal's teeth glinted like knives as it snarled at him. It's great paws came up. It whirled, and dived into concealing brush.

A nith, Danbar told him, and then was silent when Slade described what had happened in the apartment in Naze. Later, Slade saw him talking earnestly to Malenkens. The two men fell silent as Slade approached, so he was pretty certain they had been talking about him.

It was startling, that sudden discovery that he was being discussed.

It emphasized the unsatisfactoriness of his position, and made immediately necessary, it seemed to Slade, a demonstration of his powerful weapons.

He had been thinking about the best method for doing that, and finally it seemed to him that he had it. A bird. For two months he had watched birds with gay plumage frisking through the foliage over and around the marsh. Wary were those birds. He could spend an hour crawling towards a flock. And then, just before he got close enough for a good look, the birds would take off towards a remote destination. Gradually, his desire to have a close look at a winged creature with three eyes became almost an obsession.

It seemed to him, now that if he could shoot one from the ledge, he would, figuratively, kill two birds with one stone.

On the following morning, he brought a chair out of his cave, laid one of his automatics on his lap, and sat watching the brush below. After ten minutes, he noted that people were glancing at him from the corner of their eyes. A few minutes after that, Danbar pulled up a chair and sat down beside him.

"What makes you think," he asked, "that your weapon will fire in this plane of existence?"

"Eh!" said Slade.

After a moment, the possibilities stunned him. He took careful aim at a distant flock of birds. He paused to say, "This gun makes a loud noise, so prepare yourself." Then he squeezed the trigger.

Click!

It was an empty sound. It left Slade with the chilled feeling that he was naked and helpless. The sun was as warm as ever, but for two months his two automatics had given him confidence and courage. They buttressed his spirit every time he thought of how easily the several dozen tribesmen could overpower him and give him to Leear. Now, that buttress was gone.

For a moment, Slade sat quite still, then he ejected the cartridge into his palm, and began to pry out the bullet. He spilled the powder onto the cement sidewalk in a little pile, and then walked over to the nearest fire and picked up a burning faggot. He touched the flame to the powder. It burned with a slow sputter, like thick paper. Beside him, Danbar said:

"The chemical combination will have to be slightly different. I have no doubt it could be made to work."

Slade had no intention of waiting to find out. His protection was gone. Without a word, he entered his cave, strapped on his second automatic, stuffed into his pockets the smaller articles he had brought from Earth—and returned to the outside. Danbar fell into step beside him.

"You are leaving us, Slade?"

Slade said, "Where is Malenkens?"

"He's gone."

That was the second great shock. "Gone! Where to?"

He saw that Danbar was looking at him oddly. "Malenkens is not one of us, Slade. He visits us occasionally. He is one of the . . . silver belts."

Slade was silent. He realized what had happened. He had been handed over to one of the Leear hierarchy. For the first time it struck him how consistently Malenkens had been in the foreground of his tribal life. Danbar was speaking again:

"Do not blame us too severely, Slade, for anything that happens. None of us here have attained further than the molecular phase of body control. We are helpless in this struggle between the ship and the city, and so long as the city exists we can never attain the final stage of self-control.

"It is a jarring factor. Its existence prevents certain basic rhythms. The *thought* that people like ourselves are caught behind its barrier, forever unable to escape—and that is the main purpose of the barrier—to keep those people there under Geean's control—weighs upon our spirit, and makes it impossible for us to realize our potentialities. And the result of that is that we, too, are at the mercy of Geean."

Slade had the impression that he was listening to an apology. It thawed him. "Thank you," he said, "I have nothing but friendship for your people here."

Danbar said, "Go with luck, my friend."

It took more than an hour before the cave ledge was finally out of sight.

VIII

The scene grew wilder by the hour. He saw no animals, but birds by the hundreds squawked in the brush and in the trees, on average a very differnt type of bird than those that had been in the vicinity of the caves. They were less wary. Frequently, he could walk right past them without disturbing them. Towards evening, he picked up a stick and knocked two pigeonlike creatures out of a low shrub, and had his first three-eyed birds.

In that dusk, with his fire sputtering defiance at the gathering darkness, with the cries of night birds all around, he ate fresh fruit and pigeon roasted over a spit.

After eating, Slade pondered the problem of two-eyed and three-eyed creatures, and the worlds they lived in. There must be common ancestry. The human form would not have repeated easily. Way back, various creatures of the two-eyed world had developed a third eye, and had gone automatically, without their even being aware of it, into this special universe.

Actually, like sight and sense itself, the explanation probably went to the very roots of reality. What didn't exist for the mind, the senses ignored. And in some intricate fashion, the object or objects ceased to affect the body as a whole.

It was not a new idea. But the old formulation expressed by the phrase, "Is the cat sleeping under the stove while I'm not around?" failed to take into account the certainties of the human mind. The absolute conviction that the cat was there whether the observer was present or not. Blind folk acquired certainties from hearing and touch.

The mind alone counted.

As the night wore on, Slade began to think, in the uneasy periods between dozes, of guns that wouldn't shoot. It was a thought that was to occur again and again during the days that followed. It almost but not quite altered his plans.

He had intended to get the metal device, then turn sharply southward, and so walk entirely out of the territory of Naze and Leear. It was an unheroic role that he proposed for himself, and it made him a little defensive, a little ashamed.

Here am I, he thought, *in the strangest adventure a man ever got into, and I'm playing it cautious.*

There were men, he knew, who would not hesitate a minute about plunging deep into the affair. Such men would now be on their way to Naze with the intention of bearding Geean in his great central tower.

Lying in the darkness, Slade's lips tightened. It was no use kidding himself. Not for him was the bold course. The important thing was that he not let caution send him southward without the metal object. It might prove without value. But it was a clue, and, who could tell, it *might* still be in a workable condition. He couldn't leave it behind him.

The forests were quiet, the valleys long, the hills gradually higher. A great, virgin continent spread before his footsteps, but the amazing realization was the sensational familiarity of the route. There was a slight difference in the depth of the canyons and the height of the hills. The extensive marshes, the trees and the forests of shrubs were absolutely different. But the general contours were the same. And he had made the hundred mile trip to his farm so often that he wasn't lost for a minute. It was a wonderful feeling.

He came finally on the sixth morning to the long, hilly plain at the end of which—on the Earth plane—was his farm. Very cautiously, using every possible cover, he approached the point where the spaceship had been that night. From afar, he saw that it was not there, but his caution did not relax for a minute.

Within ten minutes of reaching the area, he found the machine. He used a sturdy branch he had picked up en route as a crowbar to pry it out of the ground. It was deeply imbedded, and it took considerable perspiration and twenty minutes to loosen it.

It came up finally, and showed its shape. A boxlike affair, with a wheel attached to one end. It was not too small in size, but its lightness was amazing. Pure magnesium, or even lithium, might have matched it, but little else.

He estimated the weight of the box and the wheel together at something less than thirty pounds. It glittered in the sun, untarnished by its long exposure. Slade made no effort to examine it immediately.

All that day, he carried it on first one shoulder, then another. About an hour before dusk he came to a burbling creek, and decided to stay

there for the night. It was rather exposed, but he was tired, and the nearest forest looked many miles away.

He ate hurriedly, then, his curiosity as strong as ever, he bent over the machine. Atomic and magnetic power, Malenkens had told him once, were the energy sources of old Naze. "Naturally," the man had pointed out, "they will work a little differently here than where you came from."

After his experience with his automatics, Slade could appreciate that. Nevertheless, he decided that he preferred this one to be magnetic.

He studied the machine intently.

It was the wheel that puzzled him. Only one wheel. And so large, too. The metal box, into which the shaft of the wheel disappeared, was only about a foot cube. The wheel was a little over two feet in diameter, and it curved out from the shaft like a flower with long petals that formed a cup shape. It was big enough to be a small cornucopia. It could have acted easily as a small cement mixer, so spacious was it.

"Hm-m-m!" said Slade.

Perhaps the angle was not to think of it as a wheel just because it rotated easily on a shaft.

Still, it looked like a wheel.

He spun it. It whirled and finally came to a stop. Nothing else happened.

He fumbled over the box, searching for a control device. In a way he had done that before. Now, however, he was thorough. But there was nothing.

He noticed three brighter spots on one shiny side of the machine. They looked like dents made in the hard substance. But there were no dents. His probing fingers sensed not the slightest depression.

Puzzled, Slade examined the brightnesses. He brought them close to his eyes. Glitter, glitter, glitter, he thought. Wonder what—

Something caught at his eyes.

He jerked back, letting the machine drop.

It didn't drop. It hung a foot from his face, the wheel facing up, the three bright spots like tiny blazing fires poking at his three eyes.

He closed them, then blinked rapidly. The blaze points pierced through his eyelids. In a panic, Slade shoved at the box.

The machine glided a hundred feet through the air, and came to a

stop. The three bright spots poured fire towards his eyes, as bright as if he was still a foot away. The extra distance made no difference.

Slade raced towards the machine. Have to turn it away from him, or the thing would destroy his vision. He caught it with trembling hands. And turned it upside down.

It spun around without resistance. And its mind-frightening connection with his eyes broken, it wafted gently, almost balloonlike, to the ground. Slade hid it in the brush beside the creek. Then, still shaking from his experience, lay down on the grassy bank. It was only slowly that he realized that nothing damaging had happened. His vision was as good as ever. His eyes felt cool and rested, and quite untensed.

He slept dreamlessly and without wakening all night. When he opened his eyes, the sun was just coming up. He busied himself gathering fruit from nearby trees, and he had just finished eating when a thin whistling sound rent the air to one side of him.

Slade jumped a foot as something struck the grass where he had been.

IX

He whirled, and stared at the object. A noose made of metal looking rope. It was alive in a mechanical fashion. It shuddered and narrowed, tightening as he watched it. Its two ends withdrew into a little metal box.

Before Slade could examine it further, there was another hissing sound. The second noose struck his shoulder, as he twisted aside. It bounded away like a rubber ball, almost hitting a nearby tree.

"What the—" said Slade. And dived behind a shrub. By the time he reached it, two more nooses were lying on the grass, writhing shut. Slade slid his gaze around the horizon—and saw their source.

Flying things! They were too far away to be clearly visible. They seemed to have legs but no wings. He caught a glint of scarlet, then dazzling silver, then green, and of humanlike arms clinging to something that shimmered above them. It was the shimmering objects that flew. The creatures merely hung on.

And every little while, though the motion that caused it was lost in

the distance, one of the creatures would send a noose hissing towards Slade's head.

He felt a horrid thrill. What was this? With an absolutely gruesome fascination, he remembered the girl's letter. Geean and the hunters of the city.

But the hunters were keeping their distance.

A thousand yards, he estimated shakily. Even if they had worked, his automatics would have been useless at that distance. He looked around frantically for a way of escape. But the nearest forest was about ten miles behind him. There was brush, there were shrubs, and by heaven, there was no reason to lose hope until he was actually caught.

Five nooses sprang around him while he observed and had the thought. He began to gather them up frantically. They were probably accustomed to retrieving them, and they couldn't have too many.

He darted behind a shrub. From its shelter he flicked his gaze calculatingly towards every horizon, counting the creatures. One, two . . . seven.

Slade thought jerkily, "If I can keep them off till dark."

A glance towards the sun showed that it hadn't moved a fraction of an inch, seemingly, from its position low above the eastern horizon.

Night was a long, long way off.

His lips tightened. Some of the fever went out of him. His body grew calm with determination. Straight ahead. There was no reason why, with a show of bravado, he shouldn't be able to make it—straight ahead to that distant forest.

As he twisted towards a second shrub, a noose came down from the sky, ringed him, spun a little as it struck his shoulders. And then settled down over his arms, tightening with irresistible strength.

Slade grabbed for his sheathed knife. But his hands were pressed too tightly against his body. He jerked at the snare, and stumbled over a stone, fell hard, rolling over and over.

The noose was like a steel spring. It cut into his flesh with a strength that made Slade gasp. There must be a releasing catch— Have to release it.

He strained to get his fingers up to it, but its hold was too cunning for him. As he struggled, Slade caught a movement in the near sky. It was hard to see through the pain tears that had started into his eyes. But he blinked the tears aside, and, after a moment, he saw the silver-

clad hunters clearly. They were about a hundred feet away, and swooping closer.

He ceased his hopeless fight.

The seven hunters of the city dropped from their flying devices twenty feet away. Slade looked them over briefly, wondering if Geean was among them. It seemed unlikely. Swiftly, he forgot the men. It was the reddish flying instruments that snatched all his attention. They clung for a minute to the air above the men. And then, like slowly deflating balloons, they collapsed to the ground. One man carried a spare flyer.

Each instrument was a red-frosted, glasslike extrusion about three inches in diameter and three feet long. There was a sling attached to it, and at the end of the sling some handgrips.

Nothing else. No machinery, no apparent source of energy—Slade had an impulse to make it a closer examination. He repressed it, partly because the noose held him as tightly as ever. And partly because he had his first *close* look at the men.

The day he had seen the soldiers of Geean in Caldra's and Amor's apartment, he hadn't really had time to note character. Now, with these henchmen, he did.

They were intent faces, dissipated looking, very light in color. They bent over him, and two of them were smiling sardonically. One of the men said something, and there was a quick general laughter, that ended and left the faces intent again. Slade didn't catch the words.

Slade felt the automatics taken from the holsters, and other articles removed from his pockets. Each item was swiftly scanned, then stuffed into a canvaslike bag. Before the search was finished, one of the men fumbled at the noose. It loosened promptly, and came up easily over his head.

And, again, there was speed. Even as Slade climbed to his feet and started to rub the numbness out of his arms, another man shoved the handgrips of the spare flyer into his fingers, and pointed at a third, who was just picking one of the fliers off the ground.

"Watch him," he said curtly.

As Slade watched, the third man swung the bar up in front of him with an easy rhythmic swing. And, simultaneously, with dexterity, leaped into the air.

The glasslike bar caught at something. It stiffened, straightened, and

pointed like an arrow from a bow. It began to glide forward with the man clinging to the handgrips—as the man beside Slade said curtly, "Now, you."

He expected the thing to come crashing down on his head. And, simultaneously, paradoxically, he expected his arms would be half torn out of their sockets when the device caught "onto" the air.

But it wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all. It didn't fall. There was no tug, no jerk. Something, a current, a—lightness—saturated his body. And it was that current, and not the machine, that lifted him. Lifted him like thistledown borne on a climbing breeze.

Strong as metal, the flying device rode above him. But it was only a catalytic agent, *affecting* his body not transporting it. His body flew with the machine, was of the machine. The two became one. He remembered how the bars had dropped a few minutes before, after the hunters let go, and it was clear that neither could remain airborne without the other.

A great basic force welded a union between his nervous system and the machine. And the dead weight of gravity let go of him. It was like the wheel machine, he recalled with a start. He glanced back towards where he had hidden the machine, but it was not visible from the air.

The relief that came had mixed in it a greater wonder. What incredible secrets of the nervous system had these people discovered, both natural and mechanical? He saw that the other six hunters were swooping up to him. They clustered around him, clinging to their fliers effortlessly. And somehow the sweep of their machines became the direction and speed of his. It was as if his flier was guided by a sympathetic union with the other machines.

They soared low over the land and over a whole series of marshes, in and out along valleys and through forests. Slade noticed that the fliers had a tendency to remain near the ground. Not once was there a real attempt to climb high. They went around and between trees, not over them. They avoided the towering, snow-capped mountains that flanked their course. Like a river, they flowed along the easiest course, and in the end he decided that the motive power was derived from the magnetic currents of Earth. Nothing else, in view of what he knew, could explain the evenness of their course, and the *type* of transportation.

In a surprisingly short time, the clustered group of them came

within sight of a city of shining spires. Slade stared at it with glistening eyes because it was one thing to have seen it from inside, quite another to view it like this. It was about four miles wide at the mouth of a widening valley. He couldn't see how long it was. The fliers were too low, and the city stood on a plateau.

Its towers and roofs glinted in the brilliant rising sun. Clearly now, its design was apparent. The whole city sloped up towards the central tower of Geean, that reared like a pylon into the lower heavens. The height of that pylon seemed greater than he remembered it. It rivaled the near mountain peaks, and from its silvery eminence, a hazy, violet glow spread like a mist covering the whole city. The color was remarkably sharp seen from this angle. It was a mist of light that curved like a carefully worn robe onto the grass a mile from every outskirt of the city.

The fliers poised before the barrier. For a moment only. A signal flashed mirror-bright from the distant tower, and the red-frosted devices flowed forward and through the barrier like so many knives cutting through thin gauze.

They almost grazed the rooftops of low built homes. They evaded several spires, and then they began to swoop lower. They were twenty feet, then ten feet from the ground. A man reached over and grasped one handle of Slade's machine.

"Let go," he said curtly. "Drop."

Slade looked at him, amazed and uncomprehending. The surly face, so close to his own was venomous.

"Drop!"

Slade glanced down. A cobbled street was below. He hesitated, then let go. The instant return of weight made a thrill in his nervous system. He struck the ground harder than he liked. Twice, he rolled over, and then he was up. The fliers were already disappearing around a nearby spire.

Abruptly, he was alone.

STATEMENT TO THE CORONER'S JURY
BY JOHN ALDEN, FARMER, SMAILES COUNTY

It is my custom to arise at 5 a.m. every morning. On the morning of the 19th I got up at my usual hour, and I was doing my chores when I observed what seemed to me a strange spectacle.

A woman and a large bearlike beast were walking in a westerly direction across my stubble field. Since bear are frequently dangerous, the fear came to me that the woman did not know she was being followed by so large and formidable an animal.

I ran and procured my gun, but though I was inside only a minute, and there was no place where anybody could have gone to in such a short time, when I came out of the house, there was no sign of either woman or beast. Almost literally they disappeared into thin air.

It was a little after noon that same day that the smashed body of Michael Slade was discovered in the high valley two miles from my place. According to the doctor, he had died about half an hour before he was found. So it is very likely his death had no connection with the woman and the bear, whom I saw earlier.

But I report the incident for what it is worth in clearing up the mystery of the three-eyed man.

Except for the foregoing, I had never seen Michael Slade until his dead body was brought to my farm by the doctor.

One more thing: When the police from Smailes County and I examined the tracks of the woman and the animal, we discovered that they ended abruptly in the middle of the field.

I am not prepared to offer an explanation for this.

x

Slade walked slowly along, examining his position. His automatics were gone, but his knife was still in its holster. His handkerchief had been left in his pocket as well as a small case of fishing tackle and a box of morphine tablets, which he had brought along in the event of a violent accident befalling him.

Abruptly, he discovered that the side street he was on was not quite so deserted as it had first appeared. An old woman sidled hurriedly out of an alleyway, and muttered:

"Blood! or I'll murder you tonight." Slade brushed her aside, thinking: *Why had they released him? What did they expect him to do? Do! That was it of course. Geean thought he knew about the plotting that was going on, and somehow the great man of Naze expected him to lead his forces to the plotters.*

Slade laughed grimly. There was a great deal of cunning common sense in Geean's plan, but it had a basic fault. Geean was wrong in his belief that Slade knew anything.

But that didn't matter now. His purpose before the fall of night

must to be find the apartment that had once been occupied by Caldra and Amor. And since Geean was aware of its location, he didn't have to be the slightest bit stealthy about it.

He must assume for the moment that he couldn't escape from Naze, and that Geean would arrest him whenever it pleased him.

The sun was high in the heavens when he reached the fifth columnist part of the city. He recognized a street, then another, then he realized that he was near the apartment. As he hurried eagerly forward, a young woman's familiar voice whined:

"Your blood, mister."

Slade was walking on, when a gasp escaped the girl. He whirled, and stared at her. Her face was already stiffening to the encounter.

"Well," she said with a faint sneer, "if it isn't the man who was going to destroy Naze."

Slade said, "Amor!" Then he remembered Geean, and that his movement were probably being observed. "Quick," he said, "meet me at Caldra's apartment. I'll give you some blood then. But now—slap my face as if you're mad at me."

She *was* quick. Her hand came up and dealt him a stinging blow on the cheek. She swaggered away, and he walked on, for the first time beginning to realize the implications of what had happened. Amor—on the streets.

He had a sudden sense of personal degradation. Then anger against Leear. She was responsible for this.

He wondered bleakly if the girl would turn up at the apartment.

She was there ahead of him. She opened the door for him, and began to talk even as he crossed the threshold. She chattered with a mad speed. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide and staring. Her hands shook. She looked on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

She had escaped death the night Caldra was killed because she was not in the apartment. She had spent the night with a girl friend.

"I was afraid that I would go to your room if I stayed."

The feverish way in which the words were spoken reminded Slade. He climbed to his feet, and went into her bedroom. The syringe and the cup lay on the table beside her bed.

He thought sickly, *To such depths can the potential Homo Superior sink.*

He took the syringe into the kitchen, boiled some water on one of

the curious energy elements, and then sterilized the syringe needle. He inserted the needle into a vein in his left arm. The blood glittered darkly as it flowed into the transparent syringe. When it was full, he squirted it into the cup. The liquid hissed a little as it touched the metal, but there was no other reaction. With a steady hand, he set the cup down on the table beside her.

The girl licked her lips, but she did not look at the cup. Her face was stiff, her body rigid. Her eyes were looking fixedly at the floor. She said in a monotone:

"Why have you come back to the city?"

So she was beginning to think things over. It was a good sign. Slade began to talk. He was completely frank, though brief. When he had finished, Amor's eyes were gleaming. She stood up. She was suddenly enormously excited.

"This is it," she said. *"This is it!"* She looked at him, wide-eyed. "Don't you see, it's not an accident, your being here. Everybody's being terribly clever but determined. Geean has let himself fall into the trap. Why? Because he feels safe behind his silver belt, but he's desperately anxious to find out how Leear thinks she can use you to destroy him. And in his bold fashion, he'll take risks now so that he'll know in the future."

She had started pacing the floor, as she talked. Now, she stopped, directly in front of Slade. She said in an intense voice:

"Go straight to him. That will baffle him. He's expecting you to do something. He's expecting somebody to tell you to do something. Very well, I'll tell you. Leear has said that only you can kill Geean. That means that nothing can happen until you are present.

"That means that you, under the present circumstances, have to seek him out. You can't escape it in the long run anyway. There is no escape from Naze except through Leear. And you may be sure that she'll keep you here now until you do what she wants. Besides, Geean will have you brought before him sooner or later anyway and— *Here!*"

She had raced off across the room. She came racing back carrying the cup of blood. She held it out to him. She said in a feverish tone:

"Take a sip of this. It will give you courage. The effect of a sip won't last longer than an hour."

Slade took the cup curiously. He felt overwhelmed. He had always intended to taste the stuff, though the idea of drinking his own blood

was repellent. Nevertheless, he was not going to be rushed so swiftly into putting himself into the clutches of Geean. His impulse was to temporize.

He brought the cup to his lips, hesitated. And then he took a little swallow—

"Get in there," the officer of the tower guard said insolently. "If his excellency Geean decides to speak to you, he'll let you know."

The door shut with a bang.

Slade staggered as he moved farther into the room. The sense of ecstatic, almost unbearable pleasure that had burst along his nervous system within seconds of his swallowing the blood, was gone now. What remained was a blurred memory of mad pleasure-dreams, and a gathering fury.

That little wretch, he thought, *that scoundrel, Amor. She knew what would happen.*

A sort of hypnotism it had been, driving him resistlessly through a mist of streets on wings of joyous excitement straight to the central tower of Geean. Blood drinkers must give their brains directional thoughts just before they drank. *His* directions had been to go to Geean, and here he was.

Still dizzy, Slade looked around the room. There was a bed in one corner, and a large window slashed across the opposite wall. Slade peered shakily out of the window, and blinked. He was looking down into a depth of distance. He estimated seventy stories, and he was leaning forward to verify the height when the realization struck into his brain that he was *able* to lean forward.

There was no glass in the window.

He retreated back into the room, shocked by his mental condition, that had made it possible, however briefly, for him to be unaware that the window was a hazard. Better lie down, he thought shakily.

He dreamed a miserable after-drug type dream. In the dream, his body was flung out of an open window, to fall seventy stories to the ground below. He awakened, shivering, and then grew rigid:

A nith was standing beside his bed, its long, powerful head projecting above him. Its three eyes staring down at him were pools of unnatural light. It saw that he was awake, but made no effort to move away. It said:

"Who told you to come here?"

It stood there waiting.

Vagueness. Slade's brain had been tensed for almost anything. But not language, not speech. The surprise was too great for ordinary adjustment. Caught completely off guard, his conscious mind temporarily suspended function.

It was not funny. His metabolism was affected. There was a rush of loose nervous energy through his body. Nausea came, followed by an inability to perform certain normal releasing reflexes like swallowing and blinking. The blood seemed to congeal behind his eyes, and his vision blurred sharply.

He had an acute conviction, not a thought but a fear, that he was going to be precipitated back to the other earth. The fear grew so monstrous that his first thought was able to come through. His dream— He would fall seventy stories if he was knocked out of this plane. The picturization of that fall almost petrified his reason.

But the seconds passed, and nothing happened. His confidence returned. The nith's bear-cat head was only a foot away from his face, as it said:

"What is the plan to destroy Geean?"

There were several things about the speech that almost got Slade going again. It was not a speech. There was no sound at all. The creature was thinking at him. This was mental telepathy.

Slade lay stiff, striving to grasp the implications of a beast that had a better than human system of communication. Memory came of the wild animals that had watched him, and the wariness of the birds near the caves. Was it possible that they were all mind readers?

The thought ended. The nith was snarling threateningly. A great paw came up.

"What is the plan?"

In a synchronized jerk, Slade flung himself to the far side of the bed, and snatched his knife. Horribly afraid, he tumbled off the bed. Then he was on his feet, knife ready, backing towards the nearest wall.

"Careful," he said. "I'll sink this knife into you six inches at least."

Afterwards, Slade was not clear as to what happened then. He was partly facing the window when a second nith walked in from the empty air of seventy stories above ground. It carried a foot-thick transparent weapon, which cast a pale reddish radiance towards the first nith. The beast must have died instantly, but it took more than a min-

ute for the radiance to dissolve its great body into nothingness. The newcomer looked at Slade. It thought at him urgently:

"A traitor. We've been waiting patiently for Leear to give the word to kill him. But now, there's no time to waste. First, I'd better get rid of this—" Slade didn't get the word it used to describe the weapon.

He watched as the animal dextrously split the instrument in two. Inside was a simple set-up built around a loose strip of metal about an inch by three inches by four. The nith's paws clutched the small object.

"Quick," it said, "put this in your pocket. Like this."

It was not something about which Slade had any say. The animal bounded towards him. Before he could decide whether he was going to resist, it had slipped the metal strip into his left coat pocket. Slade watched as it jammed the two sections of what remained of the weapon under the bed.

It came erect with a jerk. "They're coming for you," it said tensely. "Remember, there's no victory yet. What we have done so far we could have done years ago.

"This is the crisis."

The door opened, and half a dozen soldiers came in. Without a word they led Slade out into a long, dim corridor and into an elevator. The nith followed. The elevator creaked upward about ten floors. Another corridor, then a door that opened into a spacious apartment.

A tall man with a powerful physique was standing looking out of a glassless window. He was dressed in the silver shining clothes of a hunter of Naze, and until he turned Slade had no sense of familiarity. It was that that made terrific the shock of the recognition.

Geean was Malenkens.

XI

It was a morning of devastating shocks for Slade. He was aware of the great man watching him with a faint smile, and it was the contemptuous texture of that smile that finally pulled Slade out of his desperate turmoil.

In a burst of thought, he saw the picture. Danbar's apology. Explained now. Geean's nith that night at Caldra's apartment must have read his mind, and on the basis of the information it secured, Geean

had been enabled to lay in wait for him at the cave village. There, without asking any questions, he had learned from Slade the detailed story of what had happened.

Bloodthirsty threats must have been used to silence so completely men like Danbar.

The other's smile was more satiric. "You're quite right," Geean said, "that is what happened."

The words, so accurately reflecting his thoughts, startled Slade. He looked at the nith, and its mind touched his instantly.

"Naturally, I am giving Geean a censored version of your thoughts. That is why he used the traitor nith. He had to have somebody who could read minds, and I was selected as a substitute because of my overall resemblance to the dead-one. But now, you must be on the alert."

It went on with ill-concealed haste: "Geean is not as calm as he appears. He has a tremendous respect for Leear, and something has already happened to make him realize that this *is* the crisis. If he should suddenly become afraid, he will kill you instantly.

"You must accordingly be prepared to act on a flash thought from me."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

There was no answer to that intensely thought question. Slade licked dry lips, as the realization penetrated how completely he was involved in the moment by moment developments. He thought, "I've got to convince Geean, persuade him that I'm no danger." Before he could speak, Geean said:

"Slade, you are alive at this moment because I am undecided. A woman"—his voice grew savage—"named Leear, the only other silver belt immortal, has claimed that she can use you to kill me. I could murder you out of hand, but she would soon be able to produce another person like you with which to threaten me, and the next time perhaps I might not find out about it in advance. This is the time I must take any attendant risks. You are the man who benefits for the moment. Slade, I must find out what her method is. To me, nothing in the world matters as much."

It was impressive. Geean's face had changed as he talked. Earnestness was in every line. The man was fascinated to the core of his soul by the threat to himself. He, who was immortal, was suddenly menaced,

and the startling thing must be the vagueness, the lack of detail of that all-embracing menace. Hundreds of years had probably passed since Geean had experienced such an excitement of interest.

Slade's private thoughts ended, for Geean was continuing, his voice harder, his manner more intent:

"Slade, it is clear to me that you are an unwilling pawn in this affair. But I can do nothing about that. Here you are. The issue has been forced despite all my warnings to Leear. At this moment, and there is no question that it is her doing, an atomic fire is raging on the fortieth level of the tower. It will not be long before it reaches us up here."

Briefly, Slade's attention wandered. He stood, startled. An atomic fire. Why, that meant the tower would be destroyed, the barrier would come down forever. Naze was already doomed.

In his mind's eye, he visualized that fire of fires. He began to tremble. The others undoubtedly had methods of escape, but what about him. The implacable voice of Geean went on:

"It has always been possible for Leear to start such an uncontrollable atomic reaction among the machinery of the barrier, but long ago"—his tone grew remote—*"long ago,* I warned her that if she ever did I would murder every human being on the planet."

His eyes, as cold as glass, fixed Slade. The change in the man absolutely astounded Slade. At the beginning, he had had something in him of the stern kindly appearance of Malenkens. All gone now. His face was transformed. It was like a mask, so deadly, so cruel that Slade was taken aback. In the space of a few minutes Dr. Jekyll had become Mr. Hyde. Geean said in an infinitely savage voice:

"At all times Leear has known that if she destroyed the barrier I destroyed the race. She has made her choice. So it shall be."

The words were so ultimately meaningful that they did not immediately make sense. Slade was thinking that the spectacle of Geean changing had been like being in the presence of a man who was drinking himself into a piglike state, like having a sudden glimpse of sewer, like being compelled to watch an obscene picture. Slade shivered with repulsion, and then, abruptly, his absorption with physical things passed. In one jump, the immense meaning of the man's words penetrated.

He felt half paralyzed, and then, stronger than before the realiza-

tion came that he must convince Geean, must persuade him that Michael Slade would do nothing to injure him. He parted his lips to speak—and closed them again.

A shape was walking into the window behind Geean. It was a woman's shape, momentarily insubstantial. The nith must have warned Geean, for he turned mustering a grimace of a smile. The smile became a broad sneer as Leear came into the room.

Slade looked at her stiffly. He had an idea that his life was hanging in the balance. Now that Leear had arrived, Geean must be tensing to the necessity of dealing swift death to the one man who was supposed to be able to kill him. The nith's tremendously anxious thought impinged upon his mind:

"Relax, man, for your sake and ours. Surely, you have enough experience now with the nature of the nervous system to realize that an unrelaxed man is at a terrible disadvantage. I assure you that I will give you some warning. So be calm, and face this deadly situation."

Relax! Slade clutched at the hope. Relaxation should be easy to him now. The hope went deeper, farther. What a tremendous and terrible joke on Geean was the presence of this nith.

Slade looked at the animal in a great wonder. There it sat on its haunches, a gigantic cat bear, reading everybody's thoughts, passing on to each person a censored version of what it saw. And Geean believed—stood there, cold and confident, and *believed*—that it was his nith.

If he was really unkillable, then that delusion meant nothing. But if Leear had a method of killing him, if there was a weakness in his impregnability, then Geean had made the mistake of his career.

Slade drew a long, deep breath, and let it out—long. Relaxation was as swift as that. Standing there, he had his first good look at Leear.

It was a different Leear than he remembered from his brief glimpses. She had been nude beside the marsh, and little more than a shadow inside the spaceship. Somehow, he had taken it for granted that she wore the rough and ready clothes of the cave dwellers.

He was mistaken. No cavewoman was here. Her hair was a braided marvel, not a loose fringe, not a straggling curl. And it glowed with a lacquer-like luster. She wore a silkish garment that seemed brand new. And it must have been designed for her. It showed off her figure with an almost demure good taste. Even her dominating attitude was

softened, for she sent a quick, warm smile at Slade, and then, as she faced Geean squarely, the smile faded. If she intended to speak, she was too slow. Geean it was who broke the silence:

"All decked out in your bridal finery," he sneered. He began to laugh. It was a loud, insulting laughter. He stopped finally, and turned grinning to Slade. "You will be interested to know, my friend, that you are the last hope of this ten-thousand-year-old spinster. It is a little difficult to explain, but the cavemen, by very reason of their type of nerve training, are adversely affected by the aura of a woman who gains her nerve power by mechanical means. Accordingly, she cannot get a husband for herself among them. That leaves my blood drinkers out there"—he waved a hand towards the window—"and you."

The grin was wider. "For reasons of morality, she is not interested in a man who has formed the blood-drinking habit, which of course narrows the field down to you. Amusing, isn't it?"

The grin faded. Abruptly savage, the man whirled on Leear. "And you, my dear," he said scathingly, "will be interested to know that Slade is on my side, not yours. The nith has just informed me that he is desperately anxious to convince me that I have nothing to fear from him. Since it will inform me when and if he changes his mind, I find myself in a unique bargaining situation."

He didn't realize. It was amazing, it was almost staggering to see him standing there accepting what the nith was telling him. Not that it had told a lie about Slade's intentions and desires, but the fact that it was quite coolly giving him real facts emphasized in a curious fashion how completely at its mercy he was for information.

For his own sake Geean had better be unkillable. Otherwise, he was right behind the eight ball.

"We want to show you," the nith's thought came. "If Geean will let us, we want to show you what is behind this fight of the ship and the city. That is why I told him about your determination not to kill him."

It went on swiftly, "It will be a postponement only. You cannot escape the necessity of choosing between the two worlds at war here, the two people standing before you. I can tell you this much. When the moment comes your choice will be free, but only in the sense that anything in this universe is free.

"But now, we must persuade Geean to let you hear a brief history of Naze."

Geean was quite willing. He looked genuinely amused. "So it's really come down to persuading Slade to do something. I think I ought to warn you that at the moment I am the one who is the most likely to win him over. I've just been remembering some of the things he told me about his country. Only a few years ago they dropped atomic bombs on major cities of some enemies of theirs. The parallel to our own case is most interesting, and augurs so ill for you that I would suggest you simply open your mind to the nith, and so get the whole affair over with as swiftly as possible. All I want to know is, how did you plan to use him to kill me?"

He smiled. "You won't do it? Very well, let's get it over with. It always amuses me to hear biased accounts of events in which I have participated."

He walked over to a couch, and sat down. And waited.

Leear turned towards Slade. "I shall be quick," she said.

It was not a long story that she told then. But it was the picture of the end of a civilization that had attained mechanical perfection. The immortal inhabitants of Naze were indestructible by virtue of their silver belts, which gave them nerve control. There were machines for every purpose, and all worked on the same principle—control of the human nervous system by means of inorganic energies.

As the slow years passed, the very perfection began to pall. It was discovered that individuals were beginning to commit suicide. Boredom settled like a vast doom over that ultimate materialistic civilization, and with each passing day men and women sought surcease in voluntary death.

It became a mass tendency. In the beginning, the planet had been well-populated, almost overcrowded. At the end a handful of millions lived in eighteen cities. It was into this impasse that new discoveries about the human nervous system projected a whole new outlook on the future of man.

Experiments were performed on animals and birds. In an amazingly short time various breeds were able to read minds, something which man, with all his machines, had never been able to accomplish. They reacted marvelously in other ways also, and so a plebiscite was held,

and it was decided by an overwhelming vote to put aside artificial immortality and give the new wonderful science a chance.

Leear paused and looked at Slade gravely. "There could be no half measures. It was all or nothing, no volunteer system could be permitted, no exceptions. The new discoveries proved that man, in his primitive simplicity, had followed the wrong road to civilization, and that he must retrace his steps and make a new beginning. He must go back and back away from the materialistic gods he had followed so long, away from his cities and his machines. You yourself have seen what men like Danbar can do, and he has attained only a part of the third or molecular phase of control. The final, electronic phase, impossible of attainment so long as the city of Naze exists, goes completely beyond anything that has ever been envisaged by man. With our mechanical belts, our silver belts, we have had tantalizing glimpses, but that is all. Men will be as gods, almost omnipotent, and naturally immortal.

"Do you hear me? *Naturally immortal!* In your world and my own, long ago, thousands of generations of human beings have died unnecessarily. All of them had within their own bodies the power of powers, the innate capacity to realize their every desire."

The picture had been growing on Slade, as she talked. The existence of the cavemen was explained. Odd pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of this world were beginning to fit into place, and he had a sudden dazzling vision of what she was getting at.

Leear was continuing, swiftly: "Think of your own experience," she said in an intense voice. "You came from one plane of existence into another because your mind suddenly accepted a new reality. And then there is a comparison that shows how completely wrong appearances can be. Light. The people of the two-eyed world must have a definition of light as something materialistic, something external."

She stared at him so demandingly that Slade nodded, and gave the wave and corpuscular theories of light.

"Light," said Leear triumphantly, "is a perception of the reactor, not an activity of the actor. Out there in space is a great body we know as the sun. We and every object in this room, whether organic or inorganic, are aware of the presence of that sun. We all react to its presence, just as it reacts to ours. But it sends us no heat, no light, *nothing.* The awareness is inside ourselves, inside the molecules of this table and

that chair. To us, that awareness manifests as a perception which we call light. Now, do you see, now do you realize that primitive man, unaided, followed the wrong course? He had no way of understanding the true nature of his world."

Slade hadn't expected to grasp her meaning. But he did. Only a few months before, he had attended a lecture by a disciple of Einstein. And in a distorted fashion, *this* was the famous scientist's latest theory of light. He had forgotten all about it.

He was frowning over the visualization, when he happened to glance at Geean. That brought him back with a start to an entirely different kind of reality. He said:

"Where does Geean fit into all this?"

Geean said dryly, "I was just going to ask that question myself."

Leear was silent for a moment. Then, in a low voice:

"There was opposition, of course, to the great plan. All silver belts had been destroyed except those of myself and my companion who had been chosen by lot to man the ship which you saw, to watch over the experiment, to chronicle its progress, and—"

She stopped. "There was opposition," she said, flatly. "A small, selfish minority led by Geean—"

Again, she stopped. This time Geean laughed, but the laughter ended abruptly. He said somberly:

"They had no idea how far I had decided to go."

Something of the remorselessness of the decision he had carried out then came into his face, and into his voice, as he went on:

"My forces struck one night at the seventeen cities, and wiped them out with atomic bombs. By a trick we secured the belt of Leear's companion, and killed him. That is the belt I now wear. We had planned also to destroy the ship, but by pure accident Leear had taken it from its berth."

He breathed heavily with the memory of what must have been the shock of shocks of his long, ruthless life. His eyes were narrowed to slits, his body tense.

"She attacked our storehouses in Naze. By the time we got the barrier up, she had destroyed all chance of our ever making more belts."

Geean gave a final reminiscent shudder, and then straightened slowly. He looked around belligerently. "Enough of this," he said. "I can't

quite imagine a stranger to this world getting so heated over something that happened more than a thousand years ago, that he will risk his life to avenge it."

So quickly did the conversation sink to practical verities.

XII

It was too long, Slade thought grayly. Too many centuries had passed since that colossal crime had been perpetrated. And yet, in spite of the vast time gap, something of the horror of it reached across the years and touched him.

For the problem was still here. *Here,* in this room. The struggle for ascendancy between the ship and the city. That collective entity the ship was going to defeat the entity that was the city. But Geean would survive; and, by that very survival, he would retain the power of death over all the defenseless people of this plane.

But life centered in the individual. A man must save himself.

"You are wrong," thought the nith. "Life is the race. The individual must sacrifice himself."

That was too deep for Slade. He grew aware that Geean was still speaking at him now:

"My mind reading animal," he said, "has been keeping me in touch with your thoughts. I'm happy to note that you dismiss Leear's arguments as so much impractical metaphysics. It's possible," he went on, "that you and I are closer together mentally than I have suspected. The nith has also told me of the arguments you are marshaling to convince me that I ought to keep you alive. Frankly, I hadn't really thought about your ability to go to your earth as being valuable to me, but I can see how it might be."

Slade, who hadn't even thought of any arguments to save himself, stared at the nith in amazement. It was startling to realize that the beast had been using a skillful psychology to save his life.

"I told you," the nith thought into his mind, "that, when the moment came, your choice would be personally free. He has decided that, if no crisis occurs, he will let you live."

Slade's answering thought was grim. "But how am I going to get down to the ground?"

"That," flashed the nith, "comes under the heading of what I said

before. No choice in this universe is absolutely free. You can trust yourself on our side, or you can make arrangements with Geean."

So that was it. They thought they were going to force him to take one risk to avoid another. And when you got right down to it, they pretty well had him. Slade thought savagely:

"What do you want me to do?"

"Geean must die. Only you can kill him."

"I've heard that all before." Impatiently. "What I mean is—"

He stopped. For weeks he had known that this was what would be required of him. The realization had lain there in the back of his mind, to be occasionally brought forward and pondered in an unreal fashion. It was altogether different to think suddenly, *"This* is the moment."

He who had never killed a man must now kill Geean.

How?

You have in your left-hand pocket an instrument. Turn slowly until your left side is pointing at Geean. Put your hand surreptitiously into your pocket and press the button that you will find right at the top of the device.

That instrument has now had time to integrate itself to your nervous system, a nervous system which, as you know, is not yet completely stabilized in this plane. When you press the button, it will transmit to Geean in a very concentrated form your present instability. He will be instantly projected to the two-eyed plane of existence, and will fall eighty stories to the ground. Just as your bullets would not work when you first came here, so his silver belt will be valueless there.

Slade could feel himself changing color. He was vaguely aware that Leear and Geean were talking sharply to each other, but his mind couldn't begin to focus on them. *Do* that, he was thinking, to anybody.

He remembered his own fear of such a fall. And suddenly a horror came.

Just a minute. If I'm involved in this process of transferring from one plane to another, then I'll fall too.

No, you won't.

He didn't believe it. With a hot terror he saw the whole picture. This was what all that stuff about sacrificing the individual for the race had been leading up to. In his mind, he saw the bodies of Geean and

himself hurtling down and down. And it built a curious kinship between himself and the man.

"I swear," said the nith, "that you will not die."

Utter disbelief came.

And utter dismay.

The nith was desperate. "You are forcing us to extremes. Leear has decided that either she or Geean dies here today. If you do not kill Geean, then, unless he wins a complete victory, he will carry out his threat to destroy every man and woman and child on the planet. You can see that Leear cannot permit that to happen. Accordingly, the choice is yours. What you do will determine finally whether the people of this planet shall become slaves of Geean or whether they will have the opportunity to realize their natural potentialities."

Slade thought hesitantly, "You mean Leear is going to kill herself."

The nith was satirical. "Please do not concern yourself about Leear. Concern about her is a moral characteristic, shall we say a racial as distinct from an individual, think-only-of-oneself characteristic. It is purely in your mind, having no external reality. What does it really matter if this woman and all that she stands for dies, provided you live?"

It must have despaired of convincing him in time. It must have projected a thought towards the woman. For she turned even as Geean, narrow-eyed with suspicion, was saying, "Unless you leave here this minute, I shall have to revise my decision about not killing Slade." She turned, and she said to Slade:

"Please, my friend, think of the generations that have been imprisoned in this city. Think of Amor, of—"

She stopped hopelessly. "You force me," she said, "to the final sacrifice."

Her hands moved to her waist, and disappeared under her blouse. They came out again instantly dragging a thin belt. She flung it viciously. It flashed with a silvery metallic fire as it fell to the rug.

"Your silver belt!"

It was Geean who shouted the words, piercingly. Never in his life had Slade heard such a yell of mixed triumph and unbelief. The man literally staggered forward and snatched up the belt. His eyes were glassy and, briefly, quite myopic with ultimate pleasure. He began to

run towards the wall to Slade's left. There was a cone-shaped gadget in the near corner. With trembling fingers Geean stuffed the belt into it. It flared with a vivid fire, and was consumed in one puff.

Slowly, then, the man's sanity came back. He shook himself. He faced the room, and looked from Leear to Slade, and his face showed a mounting consciousness of the extent of his victory.

"Ah," he said ecstatically, "I am at last in a position to decide what I'm really going to—"

Slade never learned what Geean was in a position to decide. He was shocked to the core of his being. Actually, Leear's appeal on Amor's behalf had convinced him. The memory of Amor's degradation had brought a vivid picture of a people held down by a devil-like egotist.

He had turned automatically to follow the man's movements. His hand was in his pocket, and his left side towards Geean. He was thinking that under certain circumstances a man's free choice must include the possibility of personal death.

With a tiny pressure, he pressed the activating button of the gadget in his pocket.

STATEMENT TO THE CORONER'S JURY BY DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT JIM MURPHY

When the body of Michael Slade was discovered last week in the foothills near the city of Smailes, I was dispatched to the scene. It was at my request that the inquest hearing was transferred to Mr. Slade's home city, where most of the witnesses lived.

About these witnesses, I wish to say that all of them, without exception, were doubtful about identifying the deceased as Michael Slade when they were first shown the body. Later, on the stand, they were more positive, having apparently resolved their earlier doubts on the basis of "The dead man is three-eyed. Therefore it must be Michael Slade."

One of my reasons for going to Smailes was to make some attempt to find out where Michael Slade had been during the past few months.

I have considerable experience at locating missing persons, but my usual methods produced no results whatever. While the time elapsed since Mr. Slade's death has been very short, I am almost prepared to say that further search will only emphasize the following fact:

Michael Slade walked out of his own back yard in this city several months ago, and his body was discovered last week near the city of Smailes. There is no record of his whereabouts during the interval.

They climbed towards the top of the spire ahead of the ominous hum and crackle of the fire. The direction worried Slade. How were they going to get down, with flames barring the lower levels? And suppose that the fire ate through the main walls, and the upper part of the immense building toppled to the ground far below.

There was a possibility, of course, that she and the nith could get down as easily as they had come in through the windows. But Leear shook her head when Slade asked if that was to be the way.

She had stopped near a window. "We came," she said, "by means of my silver belt. I've been hoping to run into a storeroom of fliers. If we don't find any, then you are our only hope."

"Me?" Slade was startled.

She said, "Tell me, can you visualize in your mind the wheel machine which you hid in the brush near where you were captured by the hunters of Naze?"

Slade gave her an astounded look. So she had known about that. At last, he said, "I think so."

She persisted, "Including the three bright spots?"

This time he merely nodded, for he was beginning to remember what it could do.

"Then be quick," said Leear. "It's top speed is limited, something under two thousand miles an hour. It will take several minutes to get here."

Slade stared at her, and swallowed hard. But he walked with her to the window, closed his eyes, and pictured the wheel machine. The memory was blurred for a moment, then it came sharp and clear.

Standing beside him, Leear said softly, "Blink slowly, and don't strain to hold the picture of it. Let it wax and wane. All this is unimportant in a way, because, during the next six years, both you and I must learn the natural ways."

That pulled him. That caught at his brain. That tore him from his concentration. He pictured himself as he might be six years hence—it was her gentle, almost hypnotic voice that pressed him back.

"Hold it," she said quickly, "*hold* it! It will sink to Earth if you don't, and there is no time to waste. Any minute now the main barrier machinery will be reached, and then the barrier will go down. After that, even the tough materials of the spire will not stand long."

Her words steadied Slade. Away in the back of his mind was a memory of what Geean had said about bridal finery. An edge of worry shadowed his mind. Because, when you came right down to it, a man did not marry a woman ten thousand years older than himself. Amor, yes. Her failings were human, normal, forgivable. He had a feeling the girl would be willing to become his companion. He would certainly ask her.

He was so intent on the wheel machine that he missed entirely a little byplay beside him. The nith informed Leear of what Slade was thinking. The woman hesitated, then her features began to change. Her face was taking on a startling resemblance to the face of Amor when a fierce thought from the nith arrested the process:

"Don't be a fool," it said sharply. "At the moment he will not take kindly to the idea that you were Amor. You assumed that role in order to give him a sympathetic picture of a girl of Naze. He would have been shocked by the character of a real blood-drinking girl. At the moment he might blame you for the death of Caldra, even though you had gone away expecting that Caldra would try to take blood from him, and so precipitate him back to his own plane.

"Another thing," the nith went on, "I have noticed in your mind that you are responsible for his having been born a three-eyed mutation in a two-eyed world. Do not tell him that immediately either. Let him discover later that you have controlled his life from an early embryo stage. Let him find out later that you can be all woman—"

The woman was hesitating. Abruptly, she became Leear again. She saw the wavering of the purple carrier. She let out a very femininelike squeal. "The barrier," she cried, "it's down."

Her words were like a cue. There was a flash of metallic brightness in the distance. The wheel machine came through the open window, and jerked to a stop in front of Slade's eyes.

"The nith first," said Leear urgently. "Then me, then you. And don't worry. It floats swiftly."

It was almost not swift enough. The last time he brought it towards his eyes the roar of the fire was a hideous sound in his ears. He climbed into the flower-shaped wheel, shoved hard—and hung on.

The sun was a bright glory almost directly overhead. There were many people below, but as Slade drew near to the ground, he could

still see no sign of either Leear or the nith. A tall, slim young woman put up her arms towards him, and with a start Slade recognized Amor. He shouted at her, and she waved back, frantically.

He came down presently into a city that was already quaveringly conscious of its destiny.

THE VERDICT OF THE CORONER'S JURY

It is the unanimous decision of the jury that there can be no doubt that the dead body is that of Michael Slade. The unusual clothes cannot be regarded as important, and the jury therefore finds that Michael Slade met his death as a result of a fall from a height, very possibly from an airplane. There is no evidence of foul play or murder.

The Crucible of Power

BY JACK WILLIAMSON

THIS, my father's story, must begin with the great pandemic that was the background of his life, as it had been, since the twentieth century, the deadly background of human history. The Falling Sickness first attacked workers in a Greenland radium mine, in 1998. Baffled doctors talked of spores swept to Earth by the light-pressure of the Great Supernova of 1991. More probably, however, the new virus was a radiation-born mutation from some malignant proteide already known—quite possibly, even, from one of those responsible for the "common cold."

The disease attacked all nerve tissue. Commonly the ganglions and plexuses of the ear were first affected. The victims were deafened, deprived of sense of balance, usually terrified with a sensation of endless headlong falling—hence the malady's popular name.

The Falling Sickness struck without warning. People fell suddenly, at work or in the street, shrieking in fear, clutching wildly at objects about them. The infection spread swiftly from the auditory nerve, causing blindness, agonized paroxysms, nightmarish hallucinations, coma, paralysis, often stoppage of the heart, and death.

It is impossible, now, to convey anything of the horror and the magnitude of that pandemic. Only one person in five had a natural immunity, and a frantic medical science failed to find either artificial immunization or successful treatment. A third of the victims were dead in

three days, and another third were left blind or hopelessly crippled. In a century and a half, three billions died of it—more than the total population of the planet at any one time.

The clock of civilization was stopped. The brilliant scientific advance of the twentieth century seemed lost in a hundred years of stagnation, dread, and decay. Endless wars rivaled the horrors of the virus.

By 2100, however, mankind seemed on the way to slow recovery. The plague still claimed ten million lives a year, but immunity, by inexorable natural selection, was increasing. Courage began to return. Government, industry, science, and civilization struggled to resume their interrupted march.

My father, Garth Hammond, was born in the last year of the Black Century. His life might be accounted for in terms of the dark age that produced him. But I beg the visivox listener to try to see him as something more than the end product of a rugged heredity fighting to survive in a grimly hostile environment. For he was more than that. He was more, even, than the daring explorer of space, the stalwart captain of industry, the dashing Don Juan, the heartless capitalist, the greatest philanthropist, the dictator of the solar system and the conqueror of the Sun. Men have called him the most black-hearted, villainous hero the System ever knew. He was all those things, I know. But, also, he was a human being.

He was a tall and powerful man. His quick gray eyes had a keenness often disconcerting. Yet always he kept the ready geniality that came from the days when he was an impecunious and nimble-witted stock promoter. Even after the years had whitened the abundant shock of hair above his ruggedly handsome, black-browed face, he retained a vast attraction for women. My mother was not the first whose heart he broke, nor the last.

Garth Hammond has become the demigod of the whole creed of Success. Billions have been astonished at the penniless boot-boy who rose to be financial dictator of nine worlds. Millions of other boot-boys, I suppose, must have been inspired by his example to frantic application of dye and brush.

It is true enough that once, for a few months, he attended the boots of passengers on a transatlantic stratoplane. But his rise was due to something more than mere industry. He cultivated a pathetic limp,

and told sympathetic travelers a pathetic story of his mother crippled for life by the Falling Sickness—actually she had died from falling down a tenement air shaft when he was two years old. Discharged for such methods of business, he began selling knickknacks and visivox spools about the stations. The eye of a young competitor was blacked by a mysterious assailant, and his missing stock in trade discovered to have been mysteriously shipped—collect—to the Mayor of Zamboanga.

That is the beginning, crooked enough perhaps, yet with its hint of the imaginative resource that accompanied my father's ruthless ambition. His commercial career was not really launched, however, until after Cornwall's spectacular voyage to the Moon, in 2119.

Captain Thomas Cornwall was a young ordnance engineer, on leave from the army. His rocket was the first to attain the velocity of escape —11.3 km/sec. His triumphant return, after two weeks on the Moon, won him the world's frantic acclaim. The feat seemed symbolic of the reawakening of man, after the long night of the Black Century. And it showed my father the way to make his first millions.

For he was soon engaged in the manufacture of "Hammond's Lunar Oil." This elixir, secretly concocted on the prescription of a notorious quack of the time, "Dr." Emile Molyneaux, was "warranted to contain essential oils from rare lunar shrubs." It was advertised as a specific for most of the multitudinous ills of the human race. Sales, especially in those parts of the world where the Falling Sickness was still most prevalent, were tremendous.

Cornwall started legal difficulties with an indignant public statement that he had brought back no plant specimens from the Moon. My father's reply was to finance a lunar expedition of his own.

One Dr. Ared Trent, a lean, brilliant, intense young astrophysicist, had just rediscovered the cellular principle of rocket construction. Although no larger than Cornwall's, his rocket was far more efficient. He was able to carry two companions and a good deal of equipment, including a dismantled telescope.

The "Hammond's Oil Expedition" remained one hundred days on the Moon, and safely brought back specimens and observations of great scientific value. The adventure was well publicized—and sales of the elixir boomed again.

In order to meet the enormous demand, however, the compound was varied with cheaper chemicals and an increasing amount of water.

This, together with Trent's delay about publishing any description of the supposed plant life found on the Moon, brought more legal trouble. There were charges that mistaken dependence on the elixir had resulted in thousands of deaths. My father finally closed the plant.

But Garth Hammond had already harvested millions, and he was ready, now, for a greater enterprise. He was not long in finding it. His first attempt led to disaster—for all but himself. Then Trent's photographic studies of Mars, made from the Moon, precipitated the most momentous events of modern times.

Reborn after the Black Century, industry soon faced a grave "power famine." Reserves of oil and coal were depleted; river and tidal power projects had been developed to the practicable limits; increased demands for food cut off conversion of the agricultural surplus into fuel alcohol; direct utilization of solar power still seemed as much a dream as atomic energy. And power, my father realized, was the key to greatness.

"Power, Chan," he used to tell me, "is power!"

Prices rose; wages sank. The rich were the owners of power sites or fuel reserves; the poor, "power starved," forbidden private transportation, actually hungry, shivered in helpless discontent.

Garth Hammond saw, in this bitter need, a great opportunity. His first, disastrous attempt to grasp it was suggested by his old associate, Molyneaux. Pseudo-engineer as well as quack doctor, Molyneaux revived an old project: a twelve-mile shaft in the planet's crust, to tap possible mineral wealth and generate power from volcanic heat.

The Volcano Steam and Metals Corporation proved to have been a singularly apt name for the enterprise. For, after a billion dollars had been spent to sink the great pit forty thousand feet, the bottom of it suddenly split. Men and refrigerating machines were drowned in flaming lava. A rain of boiling mud drowned the new city of Hammondspit, Virginia, taking twenty thousand lives.

Molyneaux was killed in the eruption. Full responsibility for the disaster was somehow placed upon him. All the records of the corporation had been destroyed, and its tangled affairs were never entirely straightened. A fact, however, which used to rouse the ire of luckless investors, was that my father seemed to have lost nothing by the failure of the project.

He remained prosperous enough, indeed, to purchase an entire is-

land in the Aegean. There he built a marble replica of an ancient Roman villa, complete with all modern conveniences. There he took my mother as a bride—his second wife, she was Sabina Calhoun, frail, lovely daughter of an old aristocracy. And it was there, in 2130, the year after the disaster, that I was born.

It was to that island palace that Trent soon came. Some Napoleonic complex drove my father always onward. He was already restless and uncontent, my mother used to tell me, before that epochal visit, whose results broke her heart and opened the conquest of so many worlds.

Ared Trent had been busy for five years analyzing and publishing the results of the lunar expedition. He was a lean, tall fellow, habitually silent, methodical of habits, with a brilliant mathematical mind —and now on fire with a stupendous Idea.

"These things on Mars!" His excitement stopped my father's weary stalking through the marble halls. "On the Moon, without atmospheric interference, they photographed unmistakably—and they are *works!*"

He flourished photographs and drawings.

"Engineering works! About both the ice caps there are drainage channels, dams, pumps. Still operating mind you—for I saw square fields turn olive-green in the spring! The Schiaparelli 'canals,' I'm convinced, are cultivated belts!"

He shuffled the photographs, excitedly.

"And here's something else, Hammond—I don't know what." An odd note of awe slowed his eager voice. "A thing shaped like . . . well, like a barrel. It's dark. It's half a mile thick. It stands alone on the desert plain, a few hundred miles northwest of *Syrtis Major*. It can be natural. Some construction—I can't guess what. But—tremendous!"

I can hear my father's calm question: "Well, Trent. But what of it?"

"Machinery!" cried Trent. "Colossal machines—running! But what is their source of power?" His dark eyes stared feverishly at my father. "Coal and hydrocarbon deposits must have been used up ages ago. Without seas, they have no tidal power. Rare atmosphere makes wind plants ineffectual. Sunshine is only about half as intense as here. Atomic power? I couldn't guess!"

He waved the papers. "No, Hammond, I don't know what they have—but it's something we haven't got on Earth."

"Well, then, Trent," my father calmly announced his decision, "we're going out to Mars, you and I—and get it!"

"To Mars!" The astronomer began to tremble. "Mars—if we could! What an opportunity!" His dark head shook. "But wait, Hammond! It's hundreds of times as far as the Moon. Enormous technical difficulties. Trip would take two years, between oppositions. And cost millions!"

"I've got the millions," said Garth Hammond. "You can build the ship. We're going!"

My frightened mother pleaded in vain against the project. My father returned to America with Trent the very next day, to begin the preliminary arrangements. My mother, in frail health since my recent birth, remained on the island. He did not come back to live with her. His fancy soon turned to the visivox actress, Nada Vale. The next year my mother was quietly divorced, given the island home and a generous annuity. She was still devoted to Garth Hammond, and the separation was a hurt from which she could not recover.

The Martian ship was two years building. Finished in 2132, it was a four-step rocket, each step containing thousands of cellules, each of which was a complete rocket motor with its own load of "alumilloid" fuel, to be fired once and then detached.

The rocket stood on the summit of a mountain: a smaller mountain of glittering metal, tapering toward the top. A spidery ladder led up to a high, tiny opening. Bright sun shimmered on the metal and on the snow, but the December wind was bitterly cold. My mother lifted me off the snow, and so I found that she was sobbing.

Trent and two others climbed up the ladder. Garth Hammond waited, his smile flashing, talking to a crowd of newsmen. Someone pushed through and thrust a legal paper at him. The investors in the power-pit were still bringing suits and getting out injunctions.

I heard my father's roaring laugh, and saw him tear the paper in two.

"They say the arm of the law is long," his great voice boomed. "But so is the road to Mars."

He whispered something to my weeping mother, and patted me on the head.

"You used to reach for the Moon, Chan," he said. "Well, I'm going to bring you something bigger."

He turned to mount the ladder, and then I saw another woman clinging to him. She was Nada Vale, the red-haired actress. I thought that she was beautiful, though I knew my mother didn't like her. She was crying wildly, and hanging to my father. He pushed her away, and swiftly climbed the ladder.

"Garth! Garth!" she was screaming. "You'll be killed! You'll never come back!"

White-faced and silent, my mother took me down to the little village. From the window of our room in the small hotel, we could see the rocket, like a shining crown on the mountain. A siren moaned. Mother caught her breath. The whole mountain was suddenly swept with smoke and fire. Windows rattled, and there was a huge roar of wind and thunder. And mother pointed out a tiny speck, trailing fire, vanishing in the sky.

"Your father, Chan," she whispered. "Off to Mars!" She sat a long time, holding me tight in her arms. I was afraid to move. "That Nada Vale," she breathed at last. "I . . . I'm sorry for her."

We went back to the island, and waited. The whole world waited for the next opposition, when they should return. Astronomers watched the Red Planet, radio hams trained loops on it. But there was no sign or signal. My fifth birthday came and passed. Hurtling Earth overtook Mars in its orbit, and left it swiftly behind.

And still my father did not return.

II

For eight minutes that seemed eight centuries the four men in the ship were deafened and battered and mauled by the wild force of the rockets. Then followed sixty-seven days of silent monotony, as inertia flung them out toward the orbit of Mars.

The nine tons of "pay load" included concentrated supplies carefully calculated to last two years; the stock of manufactured goods, chemicals, metals, and jewelry, which my father hoped to trade for the precious secret of Mars—and the arsenal of rifles, pistols and grenades, machine guns, a 37 mm. automatic cannon, and an especially designed automobile howitzer firing incendiary and demolition shells, which he planned to bring into use if the secret were not voluntarily forthcoming.

The two other men had been carefully selected. Burgess was a famous power engineer, who was also a linguist and therefore an expert in communication. Schlegel was a German artillery engineer, who had been military adviser to a dozen different revolutionists in that many countries, and was reputed to be worth two divisions. The four had drilled and practiced for six months with the weapons aboard—quite unaware of the disaster waiting.

Every day the Red Planet grew. Engineering works and cultivated strips became unmistakably clear. And gray rectangular patches hinted of—cities?

"Cities they are!" at last Trent cried. "And I've seen motion—some moving vehicle! Yes, Mars is alive, Hammond. Alive—but dying. Most of the fields are dead and brown. Most of the machines are stopped. Most of the cities are already drifted with the yellow sand.

"And that . . . that thing, alone in the desert—"

He turned the telescope again toward that chief riddle of Mars.

"Looks like a rusty metal barrel," he whispered. "Round in the middle, with hexagonal ends. Three thousand feet tall! And standing there alone, far from the nearest city, deserted. Its shadow like a mocking finger pointing— *What* could it be?"

"Land near it," my father said, "and we'll find out before we call on the natives."

Trent eagerly agreed. But, when at last the ship was hurtling moonlike about the planet, braking her velocity in the upper atmosphere, one of the cellules in the second step exploded. Years later, a man named Grogan, whose family had all been killed in the power-pit disaster, confessed to willful sabotage in the plant where the cellules had been made. The electric firing system was wrecked. The ship plunged down, out of control.

Frantic effort averted complete catastrophe. Trent detached the entire second step, began to fire the third. But controls were completely wrecked, and the cellules began to fire one another by conducted heat.

Realizing that only a few seconds were left, Trent opened the valve, in desperate haste, to the rare atmosphere of Mars. Both of Schlegel's legs had been broken by the fall. My father helped him out of the wreck, took him on his back, and ran after Trent and Burgess.

Behind them, the thousands of cellules were thundering and vomiting out a mountain of smoke and fire. They had staggered only a short distance when there was a terrific final explosion. Metal fragments shrieked about them. The German's head, beside my father's, was blown completely off. Burgess received a wound in the chest from which he died after Trent had removed a scrap of ragged steel.

Both injured, Trent and my father survived. But their plight seemed grave enough. Food, water, and oxygen masks were lost. They found the air of Mars, on account of its relatively high oxygen content, breathable, but it did not allow violent or sustained exertion. Their stock in trade was lost, also the collection of models, pictures, books, radio and motion-picture equipment, with which they had hoped to establish communication. The weapons were gone, and their fighting man. Final and most crushing blow, return to Earth seemed forever cut off.

Blackened and bleeding, Trent stood looking back at the wreckage, wringing his lacerated hands.

"My free space observations," he was moaning. "And all our equipment—"

"Hammond Power has taken a tumble, all right," my father agreed, and gasped painfully for breath. "But we aren't sold out!" He wiped at the blood that kept trickling into his eyes, and stared about the flat desolation. In every direction swept an interminable waste of low, rusty dunes. "Where"—a wisp of acrid saffron dust set him to coughing—"where are we?"

"Ten degrees, probably, north of the equator." My father's head still rang from the blast, and Trent's voice, in the thin air, sounded very small and far away. "At least a thousand miles west of that barrel-thing."

My father stared at him and up at the shrunken Sun.

"The night—"

"Unless we find shelter," Trent agreed, "the night will kill us." He peered southward. "There's a settled strip. I had just a glimpse, as we came down. Maybe ten miles. Maybe two hundred. I don't know how fast we were moving."

My father nodded suddenly. "We can try. Let's go."

"First," Trent said, "the others."

Very hastily, panting with the effort, they covered Burgess and the

German in shallow sand graves. A brief search of the vast shell hole where the rocket had fallen revealed no useful article intact. Empty-handed, clad in torn, scorched rags, they plodded southward across the dunes. My father was wearing a pair of inadequate soft slippers. They soon fell apart, and he went on barefoot.

"Hammond Power," my father whispered, and coughed again. "Two queer beings on Earth would probably wind up in some zoo—unless some panicky citizen shot them first! Their chance to learn, say, the science of sub-electronics—" He shook his head. "Do you suppose they saw us?"

"Possible," said Trent. And, within an hour, they knew that their arrival was known. For a small bright-red aircraft, which had a double streamlined shape, like two thick cigars fastened side by side, came silently over the dunes from the south.

The two men, in a sudden panic, tried to hide in the sand. The machine circled noiselessly above the wrecked rocket, and then flew back above them, without landing. They ran after it, at last, waving and shouting frantically, but it paid them no heed.

They struggled on. The rarefied air, Trent commented, and the lesser gravitation, tended toward a physiological balance. But both were coughing. Their lungs had begun to burn. Trent discovered that he had a rising fever.

Both were tormented by extreme thirst, as the dry atmosphere sucked moisture from their bodies. And there was no water.

The small Sun was low and red, and a thin, piercing, icy wind had sprung up out of the east before they saw the first actual Martians. It was Trent who looked back from the summit of a low dune, gulped voicelessly, and pointed.

The Martians came following the two sets of plodding prints in the sand. They rode yellow, ferocious-looking armored beasts that hopped like gigantic fleas. They wore bright leatherlike garments, and flourished gleaming weapons and rode astride and upright, like men.

Like men. That unexpected pursuit filled Trent and my father with a sudden blind fear. They fled uselessly across the dunes. But still, so strong is man's anthropomorphism, they thought of those wild riders in essentially human terms.

Actually, perhaps, the dominant beings of Mars proved more manlike than the explorers had any right to expect. They were bipeds,

walking upright. They had two-eyed faces of a sort. They communicated with a guttural, rasping speech.

For all that, however, the Martians have more in common with the arthropoda. Horny exoskeletons and fine-meshed scales instead of skin, with muscles and vital organs shielded in tubular armor. But in the chemistry of vital fluids and metabolic processes, in the subtler psychological reactions, they are like nothing on Earth.

This small mounted band had trailed Trent and my father from the wreck. One of the hopping beasts was laden with scraps of twisted metal, and some of the beings had bits of Burgess' and Schlegel's blood-soaked clothing.

The flight was soon ended. The Martians carried long red lances whose hollow metal shafts, it swiftly developed, served also as guns. Angry bullets kicked up rusty dust. The savage riders shrieked. The leaping beasts made a dismal and blood-chilling baying.

Trent stumbled, suddenly, and couldn't rise. My father stopped beside him, breathless, with his lungs on fire. The gaunt, inhuman riders bore down upon them. They were an appalling lot, with their unfamiliar visages and their fine-scaled skins brightly hued in red, yellow, and purple. They surrounded the two men, and leapt down to rescue them from the fangs and talons of their beasts.

The men were hastily bound to a sort of packsaddle on one of the beasts, and the band turned northward again. The red double ship appeared again, before sunset, following from the south. The riders scattered, and began to fire at it with the long red tubes. It circled high above them, dropped a bomb that lifted an ineffectual pillar of dense, angry dust, and returned once more toward its unseen base.

Events confirmed my father's surmise that their captors were nomad enemies of the "canal" dwellers. That night, long after dark, the fugitive band took refuge in a labyrinth of burrows that must have been dug by the powerful claws of the hopping creatures. The captives were fed and allowed to sleep. Before dawn, the march was resumed. The respiratory trouble of the prisoners became more serious. Both sank into a fevered delirium. By the time they began to recover, the band had taken refuge in a hidden ravine where a tiny spring supplied water and grew a little forage for the beasts.

There they were held for several months, gradually learning a little of their captors' language and a few facts about them. Leader of the

band was a gnarled, haggard, long-limbed savage, of a rusty-red color, named Zynlid. He and his outlaw clan maintained themselves by raiding the fields and cities of the canal dwellers, keeping up an ancient and bitter feud with the rulers of civilized Mars.

When my father recovered from the pulmonary fever, he grasped again his original audacious object: to obtain the secret of the Martian power plants. That alone, he told Trent, would possibly enable their return to Earth.

Zynlid must have taken the two men partly out of mere curiosity, and partly from the hope of ransom. The canal dwellers, it seems, refused to bargain for the prisoners. But, out of their first efforts at communications, came a new and puzzling prestige.

The gaunt chieftain's notions of astronomy, it developed, were rather vague. From Trent's attempts—with drawings on the sand and gestures at the sky—to show that they had come from the third planet, Zynlid jumped to the idea that the two were natives of the Sun.

And his regard for beings of the Sun was considerable. He ordered their bonds removed, offered them choice food, drinks, and female companions, gave them liberty of the camp, and allowed my father to ride with him on future raids. Trent and my father made no attempt to disabuse him of the misunderstanding.

Their questions were now eagerly answered, but it was some time before they were able to make any intelligible query about power. Meantime, Trent was allowed to examine the few machines in the possession of the nomads. These included the long guns and the equipment that gave light and heat in the dwelling-burrows.

The savages, it seemed, had no comprehension of the operation of these machines. There was a taboo, moreover, associated with them, so that Zynlid was horrified when Trent first began to take a little heater-lamp apart, and permitted him to go ahead only on reflection that he was a solar being.

Trent himself made little of the investigation. The machines were electrical—even the rifles were fired by the sudden vaporization of water with electricity. The current came from little transparent tubes. These were hollow, with a metal electrode fused in one end, and a lump of a curious greenish crystal in the other. In the space between were a few tiny specks of dust, that had a silver-blue color and gave off a pale blue light when the tube was working.

"It's that dust, Hammond," Trent told my father. "A pinch of it will generate thousands of kilowatts, evidently. Lord knows what it is!"

The outlaw chieftain, when they had more of his confidence and his language, could only tell them that the fine blue grains were "dust of the Sun." They came, he said, "from the place of the Sun." And it was forbidden for others than the *gorath-wein,* the "blood of the Sun," to touch them. He himself refused even to look at Trent's dismantled mechanisms.

Pressed by my father and excited by his own scientific enthusiasm, Trent continued his fumbling experiments until a day when he was almost killed by the terrific explosion of a grain of the blue dust. Fragments of a metal crucible drilled his body like rifle bullets. He was helpless for a month.

"It's got me, Hammond," he admitted hopelessly. "Atomic energy? I don't know. There's no key—unless we can get it from the civilized tribes."

The accident lowered their prestige as beings of the Sun. Muttering of "the wrath of the Sun" and "the revenge of the holy stone," Zynlid forbade Trent, on his recovery, to continue the experiments. And it might have gone much harder with the two men had not my father already become a trusted companion of Zynlid.

That lawless, marauding life seems to have appealed immensely to Garth Hammond. He flung himself into it with his old shrewd daring and all the strength of Earth-muscles. There was a duel with one of Zynlid's chief lieutenants, who was jealous of the warrior of the Sun. My father killed the savage, and thereafter found himself in possession of the dead Martian's weapons and mount.

Although excessive effort soon made him breathless, so that the band nicknamed him "the panting one," he was able to outdo them all in wrestling and contests of strength. He took a keen delight in the strategy of raid, escape, and ambuscade. Zynlid began to rely on his cleverness. His belt was soon bright with the vivid-hued ear-appendages of the canal folk, taken as trophies.

He discovered, presently, that the band knew of the immense dark barrel-shaped object that Trent had observed from the Moon. They regarded it with considerable awe. It was the *Korduv,* the "place of the Sun," or sometimes "place of the holy stone." And all save the *gorath-wein* were forbidden to approach it.

"There's your key," he told Trent. "There's where the silver dust comes from."

As soon as Trent had recovered sufficiently from the explosion, my father arranged an expedition to take them near the mysterious object. The Martians refused to go within a hundred miles of it, and allowed Trent and my father to approach it only on fresh assurance of their solar birth.

A vast excitement fevered them as their yellow-armored leaping dragons brought them in view of the dark mass looming above the flat and limitless red dunes. Was this the key to exhaustless power and the road back to Earth?

For many miles they rode forward across the desert, and the red-black enigma loomed vaster and vaster before them. At last, riding through the cold black shadow of it, they came to its base.

Its stupendous mass was metal, they discovered, pitted with the acid of untold centuries, crusted with dark-red oxides. The dunes were drifted against it; westward the winds had cut out a vast curved hollow. Stunned with awe, they let the beasts carry them around its vast hexagon, and then withdrew to stare upward at it.

There was no possible opening in its base. Fifteen hundred feet upward, my father saw a square recess that looked like a portal. But that was in the overhanging, cylindrical middle section. There was no possibility of climbing to it. At last, no wiser, they turned back to their rendezvous with Zynlid—to be greeted with an awed surprise that the Sun had permitted their escape.

"These *gorath-wein* have got the key, Trent," my father concluded. "And we've got to have it."

And he began to discuss with the somewhat horrified Zynlid plans for abducting Anak, who was "Lance of the Sun," and priest-king of the civilized Martians, ruling from his Sun-temple in the city Ob.

"Anak knows secrets of peril," warned Zynlid, apprehensively. "And he is guarded by the hosts of the Sun."

"We know secrets also," my father retorted. "And the Sun sent me to take the place of Anak, who is an impostor in the temple."

Still seeking to convince the old nomad, he called on Trent for scientific miracles. All Trent's equipment had been lost in the wreck. An effort to demonstrate gunpowder now failed for want of free sulphur.

But at last the astronomer, if he still failed to grasp the mysterious principle of the blue dust of power, was able to repair and operate certain mechanisms that the outlaws had captured.

One that had lain a mystic but useless relic, gathering dust in a secret treasure-cavern for a full Martian century, now proved to be a weapon. A score of the enigmatic little tubes fed a Niagara of power to transformers and field coils. Its polar plates projected a tight beam of magnetic energy, whose terrific hysteresis effect could fuse metal at twenty miles distance.

The triumphant demonstration of this rusted war-engine restored all Trent's shaken prestige, and secured full support of the nomads for my father's daring plan—although most of them must have been secretly trembling with dread of Anak and his solar powers.

It was known that the priests of the Sun visited the inexplicable lonely mass of the Korduv at intervals, by air. My father packed the magnetic weapon on one of the hopping creatures, and carried it to a point fifty miles from the stupendous barrel-thing.

There, braving the heat and the cold, the thirst and the dust of the open desert, he and Trent and a handful of the nomads waited for thirty-eight endless days. At last a double red ship came soaring over the dunes, toward the dark, far-off pillar of the Korduv. The outlaws were suddenly terrified.

"The *gorath-wein!*" came their hoarse, uncanny croaks of fear. "Flee! Or the Sun will slay us all!"

They scrambled to prod their beasts from the sand-burrows and mount them. But the invisible ray, with Trent and my father feverishly busy at the unfamiliar controls, brought down the red ship. The flight turned to a mad attack on the fallen machine.

Three priests and a priestess aboard were slaughtered. The only survivor was a young female child. Anak, whom my father had hoped to capture, had not been aboard. He soon discovered, however, that the Martian woman had been consort of the priest-king, and that the infant, Asthore, was his daughter.

Another red ship, sent no doubt to investigate the fate of the first, was also brought down. From the wreckage of the two, aided by two Martians captured in the second, Trent set out to put together one complete vessel. He worked day and night. The outlaws helped, and

cheerfully tortured the two prisoners whenever they became reluctant.

Before the ambitious task was done, however, a land force appeared, marching from the direction of Ob. There were two great machines like tanks, and a hundred lancers on foot. In the desperate battle that followed, Trent never left the ship and his reluctantly persuaded instructors. He was just learning the principle of the ship's propulsion, by a system of gravity-shielding "spacial fields."

For a time the situation looked very bad. My father was able to cripple both war machines with the magnetic ray. But then a similar ray from one of the tanks discovered and fused his own weapon. The bright-scaled lancers charged, howling triumphantly.

My father gathered his five or six allies at the crest of a low yellow dune, and waited for the charge. As the yelling lancers came down the opposite slope, he walked boldly out alone to meet them, with the grave statement that he was their new ruler, sent from the Sun.

That halted proceedings for a ticklish half-hour—until Zynlid arrived with the balance of the bandit band. That was the signal for all hands to fall upon the lancers. They were cut down, to the last Martian. There were new weapons for every outlaw, and my father made himself a triumphant wreath of ear appendages.

Next day, as scouts brought word that all the eight surviving cities were sending contingents of warriors to Ob, Trent finished his repairs and safely flew the ship. The nomads triumphantly butchered the two captive priests, and ate their brains and livers in a ceremonial feast.

My father sent Trent aboard the ship with a crew of nomads and the little Martian girl, back into the northern desert. Zynlid, his hopping beasts laden with the spoils of victory, started back toward the hidden ravine. And my father rode alone toward the city of Ob.

After three lonely, grim days, parched and sunburned and chapped with alkali dust, he guided his beast into the "canal"—a belt of fertile, dark soil, irrigated from underground conduits and covered with low-lying, thick-leaved plants. He parleyed with the warriors who came to meet him, and they conducted him, half a prisoner, into the city.

Dark buildings sprawled flat and massive behind the walls and hedges that held back the seas of yellow sand. Although the city had several thousand inhabitants, and the central part about the towering

conical Sun temple was now thronged with the lancers gathered to avenge the outrage against the sacred ship, by far the greater part of Ob was mere crumbling ruin. Its gaunt, bright-scaled people seemed to my father like lonely ghosts, trying to haunt a far-spreading necropolis. Mars was far gone in death.

Stating that he was an ambassador from the Sun, my father demanded audience with Anak. Suspiciously, yet with respect born of the unprecedented disaster to the sacred ship, the lancers took my father to the ancient, many-terraced pile of crumbling black masonry that was the temple. There Anak met him.

The ruler was a tall, gaunt Martian, stiff with pride. Age had darkened his lustrous scales to a purple-black, and the horny carapace that crowned his egg-shaped head was crimson. His dark face was lean, hawklike, deeply wrinkled. Jet-black, yellow-rimmed, his eyes flamed with virulent hatred.

When my father advanced his old claim to being a dweller in the Sun, Anak shot him a look of startled incredulity that hinted of an astronomical lore greater than Zynlid's. Ungraciously impatient, he listened. My father told him that his wife and baby daughter were prisoners, and that they would be released safely only in return for certain information.

What information?—Anak wanted to know. When my father began to hint that it dealt with the mysterious power tubes and the enigmatic mass of the Korduv, the priest-king burst into a savage rage. He snatched at a weapon, rasped and croaked and hissed like something reptilian.

Finally, menacing my father with a level lance, he champed out the gutturals: "Base and lying stranger, whencesoever you come, I, the true Lance of the Sun, know you never dwelt in his sacred fires. The foul dogs of the desert may believe your imposture, but not I. The holy flame of Life would consume you in an instant."

The red shaft thrust viciously.

"I love my wife Wahneema," grated Anak. "I love my child Asthore. But better that both should perish by your tortures than that I should desecrate the secrets of the Sun. Go back to the evil beasts that sent you, and die of the Sun's flaming anger."

All my father's desperate threats and promises—even the ingenious

hint that a space fleet was on its way from Earth to rescue him and conquer Mars—proved in vain. Anak grimly resigned him to "the judgment of the Sun."

The Martians kept his beast, stripped him of weapons and clothing, and finally released him, naked and alone, in the midst of a sand desert far southward of Ob. This was remote from the usual haunts of the outlaws, and death of thirst and exposure seemed a certainty—until Trent, who had been spying from the sky, picked him up with the captured ship.

Two nights later, with Zynlid and a picked band of his men, they landed the ship on the topmost terrace of the Sun temple. Under the feeble spark of Phobos, creeping backward across the sky, they slaughtered the surprised temple guard. My father led the howling bandits down into the ancient pile. They found Anak, standing beneath a glowing yellow disk in a chapel of the Sun. He fought savagely, gravely wounding the outlaw chief. But my father snatched away his lance, and he was dragged aboard the vessel before the roused horde of warriors could reach the roof from the temple courtyard.

The ship launched upward with bullets ringing against her hull. Triumphantly, my father commanded Anak to answer Trent's excited questions. But the wrinkled old priest refused to talk. Cheerfully jesting, the outlaws began to apply torture. But the seamed dark face merely stiffened stoically.

It was Zynlid, after Trent had patched up his wounds, who solved the difficulty.

"He will never talk willingly," rasped the old bandit. "Give him this. It is a key to locked lips."

And he handed Trent a tiny hypodermic, loaded with a few drops of some colorless liquid. The drug seemed to resemble scopolamine in being a sort of "truth serum." It ended Anak's stubborn silence, and Trent at last began to learn the secret of the blue power-dust.

The old priest was kept drugged for nearly two months, constantly questioned—except on one occasion, when the injection must have failed to take effect. Then, feigning the influence of the drug, he told a series of clever lies and pretended to demonstrate another secret of the dust. Only my father's vigilance and a sudden tackle prevented an explosion that would have annihilated them all.

Finally, they took Anak into the colossal metal hull of the *Korduv*.

The frantic searchers from Ob somehow discovered their presence there. My father closed the lofty entrance valve, and, with Zynlid and his band, held it for three weeks against the desperate attackers, while Trent questioned the drugged ruler, explored all the mysterious depths of that ancient desert enigma, and made complete plans of all its colossal mechanisms.

Slowly, the astronomer pieced together the solution to the riddles of the blue dust and the *Korduv* and the limitless power that drove the engines of Mars—and found it an astounding revelation. The strange granules, which they came to call "sunstone," had come, quite literally, from the Sun!

Trent came at last to my father, in the beleaguered valve, trembling with the import of his discoveries.

"This is a ship!" he made the startling announcement. "The *Korduv* is an interplanetary ship. It was built nearly half a million Martian years ago, when the planet was at its peak of civilization. It has made thirty trips to the Sun, at intervals of ten or twenty thousand years, for sunstone."

"Sunstone?" echoed my father. "The power-dust?"

"Pure power!" cried the scientist. "Frozen, portable power—power storage, perfected to the last degree. It is condensed radiant energy—a complex, not of atoms and electrons, but of pure photons.

"Light particles, fixed! The mathematics of it is revolutionary. A radical extension of quantum physics! It also accounts for the gravity-reflecting space warp that lifts the ship, and the same field of strain can be modified to reflect radiant energy, for protection against any excess of the solar radiations.

"With a crew of two thousand Martians—the race, in those days, was more numerous and more venturesome—the *Korduv* was navigated a hundred and forty million miles into the solar photosphere. For ten years it floated there, its crew protected by the fields from a gravitation eighty times that of Mars. Its conversion cells absorbed the energy of the Sun, at a rate that amounts to fifty horsepower per square inch, solidified it into the photon dust. And finally, when the ordeal of heat was ended, the survivors—usually not a tenth of the crew—came back with the previous load of sunstone."

"Eh!" My father stared at Trent, digesting this. A dull hammering throbbed faintly through the colossal valve. His weary, bearded face

set with triumphant decision. "A ship!" he whispered. "Then we'll take it to Earth, unload what dust is left, and send it to the Sun for more."

Trent shook his shaggy, emaciated head. "The *Korduv* won't move again," he said. "It was damaged in the last voyage—that was fifty thousand years ago. Some of the cells failed, and unconverted energy cooked most of the crew and fused half the field coils. A narrow escape from falling into the Sun. The rest of the coils, overloaded, were pretty well burned up on the way back. The thing crashed here. The rest of its crew were killed, but the sunstone was intact."

"Wrecked, eh?" My father stared into the strange maze of Cyclopean engines that loomed within the faintly blue-lit gloom beyond the valve, and demanded, "Why didn't they build another?"

"Racial senescence, I guess," said Trent. "They stopped growing, and went to seed. Take old Anak. He knows scientific facts that we wouldn't have discovered, on Earth, for a thousand years. But they're frozen, dead. His knowledge is all in the form of elaborate, memorized rituals, mingled with superstitious dogma. He is ruled by the past. Half his knowledge is too sacred to use outside the temple. Any new fact would be rank heresy to the Sun. There is sunstone left to keep the pumps running for two or three thousand years. After that, Mars is doomed. 'By the will of the Sun.' "

"Well!" My father shrugged impatiently. "If this is wrecked, can you draw plans for another?"

"For a better one, Hammond," Trent assured him. "If we were back on Earth."

"First thing," my father observed, "we've got to get past our fanatical friends on the outside—but Hammond Power has gone up a thousand points!"

While the partisans of Anak continued to batter at the great valve, Trent spent three days fitting the little red ship for the Earthward voyage. Its double hull already sealed hermetically, the dusky depths of the *Korduv* yielded cylinders of oxygen, bottled for fifty thousand years. The hold was filled with sunstone, and certain changes in the wiring of the field coils adapted its drive for the interplanetary trip.

Then a tiny sunstone bomb opened a new port in the crown of the *Korduv's* hull. The little red vessel darted out through the gaping

plates, escaped the ray batteries and aircraft of the attackers, and fled safely through darkness to the outlaw's hidden ravine.

Old Anak, with his infant daughter, was released at dawn on the desert a few miles from Ob. He learned now that the mother of Asthore had been killed, and he retained memory of all that he had revealed beneath the drug. Rage and horror overwhelmed him. His drawn, dark-scaled face twisted hideously, and his black eyes flamed. He made a desperate, empty-handed attack on my father, screaming prayers and curses.

"Beware!" he was shrieking, as the vessel rose. "Desecrators of the holy fire, beware the judgment of the Sun!"

Zynlid had accepted my father's invitation to visit Earth, with a slave and his two favorite wives. A final raid supplied the vessel with food for the voyage, and Trent guided it out past Deimos into the gulf of space.

The whole Martian year was already gone. Earth had passed conjunction and was pulling swiftly ahead on its orbit. The rocket could never have overtaken it—but half an ounce of sunstone drove the Martian flier eighty million miles in only ten days.

In November, 2134, the red ship landed safely in a cornfield near New York. My father announced triumphantly that he had secured the secret of Mars—a cheap source of illimitable power.

III

I can still remember how my mother trembled, in her cool, silent, sweet-smelling room, above the twilit Aegean, as her frail, unsteady hand snapped the new visivox spool into the cabinet.

"Now, Chan," she whispered, "you . . . your father!"

She choked, and I knew that she was crying.

The little screen flickered and lighted. I saw the golden tangle of the broken stalks of corn, and the tiny ship from Mars lying across the rows, like twin red spindles side by side. A small door opened, and Trent and my father came out.

They were queer-looking men, haggard and shaggy and darkly tanned. My father wore the strange leather garments of the nomads, brilliant with the dried, shell-like ear appendages he had taken. He

flourished a long red lance, and his voice croaked a guttural greeting in an unfamiliar tongue.

But his old smile flashed, infectious as ever, behind the great tangle of his black beard. His strong teeth shone. His gray eyes had squinted a little, against the desert glare, but still they were clear and shrewd and quick.

"He's just the same, Chan," sobbed my mother. "Your father . . . *oh, Garth!*"

Her thin face was white, and I saw the great tears on her cheeks.

Newsmen shot swift, excited questions, and visivox machines were humming. My father bowed grandly, and then beckoned. The Martians came scrambling after him—gaunt, rusty-red Zynlid and his varicolored, red-crowned companions. Their movements were awkward and laborious, and their breathing seemed troubled. They blinked bewilderedly at the feverish, barking newsmen. Garth Hammond stepped before them, and bowed again, and made a little speech of greeting to the Earth.

"To every man," he promised, "I will bring more power than a king enjoyed of old. Tomorrow, the Sun Power Corporation—"

Then Nada Vale, the red-haired actress, came running into the picture. With an eager, muffled cry, she threw herself into my father's great tanned arms. His old smile flashed eagerly. He lifted her, and crushed his great black beard against her face.

Then, suddenly, my mother stopped the machine. A moment she stood beside the cabinet, frozen, her face set and white. A thin sob burst from her quivering lips. She ran quickly out of the room. I found her sitting in the darkness on a terrace high above the black sea where the stars danced and vanished, shaking to dry, breathless sobs.

The conqueror of Mars became the hero of the Earth. That wild tide of enthusiasm drowned all the old accusations against my father. The capital of six billion dollars, for the Sun Power Corporation, was all subscribed in one hectic day.

Tens of millions paid fat admission fees to see Zynlid and his ménage, in the gravity-shielded, air-conditioned apartment my father provided. The old bandit used to strut proudly before the curious, flourishing his weapons and trophies, and demanding staggering sums for posing for the visivox.

The tempest of publicity seemed to mean nothing to Ared Trent.

The public hardly realized that my father had had a companion on Mars. Stern, taciturn priest of sciene, if Trent had a human side, the world didn't know it—not then. He gathered sixty skilled draftsmen, in a closely guarded office building, and began drawing up the plans and specifications for the Sun Power Station.

Far smaller than the ancient Korduv on Mars—only a thousand feet in diameter and fifteen hundred long—the Station was still the greatest engineering feat ever attempted on Earth. The construction took over three years. Directly and indirectly, more than a million men were employed on it. The first six billions were spent, and bonds floated for three billions more.

Unlike the Martian plant, the Station was intended to float permanently in the Sun's fiery atmosphere. Ships shielded by special fields would visit it at yearly intervals, to carry supplies and relief to its crew, and bring away the precious sunstone. Eight hundred volunteers were selected, to spend one or two years exiled to the flaming terror of the Sun.

Designer of the Station, Ared Trent was to have been its first commander. But, a few months before the Station was ready to be launched, came the historic break between my father and Trent.

That quarrel has puzzled historians. The two had been friends since before my father sent Trent to the Moon. Man of knowledge and man of money, they had seemed to live in a perfect symbiosis. Biographers have suggested, and rightly, I believe, that Trent, although he seemed to have the feelings of a product integraph, actually must have suppressed a deep resentment of my father's assumption of a dictatorial superiority.

But the real key to the quarrel, I think, is the suicide of Nada Vale. The actress had obviously been desperately in love with my father. Absorbed at the time in the expedition to Mars and the conquest of power, he can hardly have cared very much for her. It is certain that they were never married. And it seems that she was bitterly jealous of the woman my father did love.

That woman was lovely Doris Wayne, heir to the Marine Mines billions. My father met her soon after the return from Mars. They were married in 2138. On the wedding night, Nada Vale drank poison in the anteroom of their Manhattan penthouse.

And Ared Trent, although no one had guessed it, cherished an old

infatuation for the actress. She had promised years before to marry him, it seems, if he came back alive from the Moon—perhaps only with a professional eye to future publicity. But, before he came back, she met his backer, my father. Trent was forgotten. And he concealed his deep injury until her suicide broke his old restraint.

At any rate, Trent suddenly demanded an equal voice with my father in the direction of the Sun Power Corporation. My father refused, astonished. There was a long legal battle, in which Trent was completely defeated. Then my father, to show some gratitude for his services, made him a free gift of ten million dollars. Trent used it to build a new laboratory isolated in South Africa, and went into complete seclusion.

Command of the Station, meantime, was given to bluff, stocky Tom Cornwall, hero of the Moon. Sitting with my mother in our island villa, I watched the launching of the Station. It was a colossal upright cylinder of massive steel, with curved ends. Incredibly tremendous, it loomed above tiny-seeming tracks and derricks, and the mills and furnaces of the new steel city that had made its metal. The crew had gone aboard. My father, magnificent on the platform, made a speech and shook the hand of Tom Cornwall. The intrepid captain vanished. The cheering multitude—people small and black as crawling insects about the Station—were herded back. Then the steel cylinder flickered curiously, and was lost in a pillar of silver haze—all light reflected by its shielding ether fields. The pillar floated upward. A sudden wind swept the throng, raising a little cloud of dust and hats. And the Station was gone to the Sun.

There was rioting, that day, on all the stock exchanges. Coal, oil, and water-power stocks dropped ruinously. SPC soared to dizzy heights. A dozen desperate investors killed themselves. My father boasted that in one day, before any wealth had come from the Sun, he had cleared nearly two billion dollars.

The great relief ship, the *Solarion,* was built that year in the same Ohio yards. I was not ten years old when it came back from its first voyage to the Sun. It brought hundreds of tons of the wondrous blue substance, frozen power, that went on the market at twelve hundred dollars an ounce.

Garth Hammond's star seemed to be shining very brightly. There was hardly a hint of the storm of trouble and disaster that rose with

the passing years, to bend his strong shoulders, bleach his hair, ruin SPC, and even to bring all the solar system to the very threshold of disaster.

But gnarled old Zynlid and his three companions from Mars, in their gravity-shielded tank, were already dead of the Falling Sickness.

IV

The frightful shadow of the old pandemic suddenly darkened over all the world. For something had happened to the virus: some reaction, physiologists said, of the malignant molecule with the alien proteins in the bodies of the Martians. Old immunities were destroyed. The new, virulent plague swept the planet. In a single year, a hundred million died. All the horrors of the Black Century threatened to return.

Among the natives of Mars the disease was even more deadly than on Earth. When my father's conquering fleet appeared on the red planet, the cities attempted to resist and the Korduv was blown up. It is uncertain whether, as enemies of my father have charged, the Falling Sickness was deliberately spread. But, within a few weeks, it destroyed half the inhabitants of Mars. The planet surrendered. Anak, the old priest-king, was forced into exile. He came to Earth, with his daughter, and established residence in a shabby, century-old building in Washington. His brooding, bitter hatred of my father always grew, and his guarded inner rooms, armored against the gravity and the air of Earth, were an early center of the organized intrigue against Garth Hammond and the SPC.

My father had brought the Martians to Earth. He was to blame, therefore, for the new epidemic. And the Martians hated him doubly, as the desecrator of their solar religion and the murderer of their race.

Agitators made him responsible, too, for the horde of new economic ills that threatened to crush the very life from the planet. The epidemic alone, with its fears, illness, and death, was enough to cause vast depression. Added to that was the financial panic and industrial disturbances occasioned by the destruction of the old power industries and the rise of SPC.

Yet—and an item to my father's credit—industry must have been stimulated vastly by the exploitation of the other planets. After the

conquest of Mars, the new space fleets of SPC explored the Moon, Venus, Mercury, and the satellites of Jupiter. The parent corporation proliferated into a thousand subsidiary development, concessions, mineral, planting, transport, even news and amusement enterprises. There was even a Martian Copyright & Patents Corporation, to exploit the arts and sciences of that ancient planet.

SPC was suddenly the most powerful—and soon the most hated—entity on Earth. The yearly production of sunstone from the Station ran above one thousand tons. At the standard price, pegged mercilessly at twelve hundred dollars an ounce, that meant a gross annual revenue in excess of forty billion dollars—enough to make Garth Hammond virtual dictator of the Solar System.

"Trust-busting" legislation was passed by embittered liberal and labor groups—in vain. For national law ceased at the stratosphere. The only ships in space were those marked SPC, and the only law was that enforced by my father's corporation police, the famous Sun Patrol.

The law, as always, adapted itself to current reality. SPC was recognized as virtually an independent state, with jurisdiction everywhere beyond Earth's stratosphere. And Garth Hammond was its absolute ruler—though legally still a citizen of the United States, granted certain immunities as an "employee" of SPC, his only title being chairman of the board of a corporation chartered in New Jersey.

He was master of the law. The law helped suppress a hundred strikes aimed at SPC. It helped the Sun Patrol to thwart a dozen attempts against his life—in some of which Anak and the fanatical Martian *émigrés* were suspected of being involved.

The gravest blow against him came from outside the law, and outside the Earth. The *Solarion,* in 2146, returning with her seventh cargo of sunstone, was accosted by a strange vessel in space—a slim red arrow of a ship, unlike the mirror spheres of SPC. Heliographs flashed a message, signed "Redlance," demanding surrender of the ship and cargo, "in the name of liberty and human right." The captain refused to surrender, and escaped after a running fight. Next year the *Solarion* went out again, better armed—and never came back.

When the first attack on the relief ship became known, Anak had let newsmen through the valve into the great steel tank that held a fragment of exiled Mars. His dark-scaled body was now withered and bent, his strange face lined and haggard and terrible with bitterness

and hate. Stalking back and forth, like some restless, caged beast, beneath the glowing Sun disk that he had brought from the temple on Mars, he shook a lean, unearthly arm at them.

"It is the judgment of the Sun," his flat, guttural voice rasped barely intelligible English. "Garth Hammond despoiled the jewel of the Sun. He defiled the sacred places, and stole the holy secret. He spilled the blood of the Sun, slew my Wahneema!" His black, yellow-rimmed eyes glared with fanatical malice. "And he shall know the judgment of the Sun!"

Trembling, then, with a savage wrath, he drove the newsmen out.

It was soon certain, now, that "Redlance" had taken the *Solarion,* for the Earth was flooded with "bootleg" sunstone. And it seemed probable that the pirates, or at least their leaders, must be vengeful Martians, because the secret of the drive field had never been made public on Earth.

Trying to run down the sunstone smugglers, Sun Patrol operatives found evidence that linked the ring with Anak's daughter, Asthore. Grown now, she had become a peculiarly beautiful being, tall and graceful, her fine-scaled skin a nacreous white, her eyes huge and purple beneath a crimson coronal. But her uncanny beauty was quite inhuman, and she shared all her father's hatred of mankind and Garth Hammond.

Sun Patrol men, aided by Federal agents, finally closed in on the old house in Washington, with warrants for Anak and his daughter. But the tank was deserted. The exiles had fled. A planetwide search failed to discover them.

The fleets of the SPC scoured space for the pirate, searched planets and asteroids for a base, in vain. A second, hurriedly constructed relief ship, the *Solarion II,* was also lost, her wrecked and looted hull being discovered adrift near the orbit of Mercury. The *Solarion III,* in 2148, safely reached the Sun and returned. But her holds were empty and she brought appalling news. The Station itself was lost!

The cause of the disaster could only be surmised. The great plant might have been captured or destroyed by the pirates. Or, frail as a bubble floating in the flaming ocean of the solar photosphere, it might have been obliterated by the titanic forces of the Sun: cyclonic storms of sunspots, whose tremendous vortices might have dragged it down into a very atomic furnace; super-hurricanes of prominences, blasts of

flaming hydrogen flung upward at hundreds of thousands of miles an hour; heat inconceivable, 6000 degrees at the surface, intense enough to destroy the Station in an instant if deflection fields or conversion batteries failed. Or it was possible that mutiny or the Falling Sickness had annihilated the crew.

Whatever its cause, the disaster was crushing. Stocks and bonds of SPC crashed ruinously. My father found it difficult to get capital to begin construction of a new power station, and strikes and sabotage hindered the work.

The smuggled supplies of sunstone ceased as mysteriously as they had begun. Rusty windmills and turbines turned again. Men groped into abandoned coal mines. Prices rose enormously. Unemployment soared. Farm machines stood idle for want of power. Famine pinched the world—and malnutrition invited a hideous new wave of the Falling Sickness.

And on my father's shoulders fell the blame for all these misfortunes of humanity. I was near him, in those black days—with a court order, when I was twelve, he had taken me from my mother. At first I had been resentful. I had hated his luxurious home, and hated his new wife, Doris, for taking my mother's place. But she had been always kind. I had come to like her. And I couldn't help a vast admiration for my father, now, and a sympathy for him in his sea of troubles.

"It's just about the finish, Chan," he told me wearily, one day, when I had found him sitting motionless as a black statue at the big desk in his sumptuous office. "It would be four years, or five, before the new station could furnish any revenue—even if the pirates let it be. SPC can't hold out that long."

I tried to encourage him.

"One chance," he admitted. "If I could get Trent. The best mind I ever knew. If he would forget—"

But the search for Trent failed. Years before, with my father's gift, he had built a great laboratory in South Africa. But the isolated buildings had now been for several years abandoned. And Ared Trent was gone without a trace.

Upon that failure came the thrust of sharper disaster. My father's wife, the former Doris Wayne, contracted the Falling Sickness. After two days of agony, clinging to the bed and screaming with that frightful vertigo, she died. It was after that that my father's hair began to

turn white. His big shoulders sagged. Turned to a grim machine, he refused to leave the office for rest or sufficient sleep.

Without sunstone, it would soon be impossible to navigate space. Revenues from the mines would stop, and the colonies would have to be abandoned. The interplanetary prestige of SPC was vanishing. Hostile groups passed ruinous restriction and taxation measures.

"Bankruptcy, Chan!" I had gone to the silver tower of SPC, in Manhattan, to try to persuade my father to come home for the week end and rest. He was leaning heavily on the big polished desk, staring down at a dusty blue bottle labeled "Hammond's Lunar Oil."

His eyes looked up at me, hollow, dead. "I've kept this, Chan," he said. "To remind myself that it all began with a little colored water. But I guess I forgot. All this doesn't seem real. Not possible!" He ran a tired hand back through his thick white hair. "But I began by shining boots, Chan. And it looks as if you will, too."

It was then, when his troubles seemed to have reached the last extremity, that the thing came, the stunning revelation, that reduced them all, by comparison, to nothing.

A strange space vessel was seen above New York. It landed on the great Long Island field of SPC. It was a long, sinister bolt of crimson. Its hull bore scars of battle, and it was black-lettered with the name *Redlance.*

The port authorities were in a flurry of fear, but they soon discovered that the pirate designed no harm. A haggard, white-haired man stumbled out of the valve, and wildly demanded to be taken at once to my father.

I was in the office when they met. My father was wearing a white laboratory apron, and his fingers were stained with chemicals. He smiled—and suddenly recklessly invincible as in the old days—and then seized Trent's hand with evident warm emotion.

"Well, Ared! So you are Redlance. After all, who else could have done it?" He stepped closer, earnestly. "Can we be friends again? I've made mistakes, Trent, and I'm sorry for them. The SPC is beaten. But now I've come on something new. If you will help me, together we—"

The lean man had been staring at him with feverish, bloodshot eyes. And Trent's voice rasped suddenly out, hoarse and desperate: "No, Hammond! There's nothing left." He licked his cracked lips. "Forget your schemes, man. We're finished. Done!"

My father quickly caught his arm. "What do you mean?"

"I've been a damned fool, Hammond. Yes, I was the pirate. I hated you, Hammond. Because you wanted too much power. And . . . Nada— But forget all that. I built the ship—in Africa. I gathered a crew of human scum and Martian fanatics. Joined old Anak's plotters. God help me, Hammond!

"We took your two relief ships. And then, using the first *Solarion* to trick Cornwall, we took the Station. And then Anak, with his Martian devils, and his lovely, lying snake of a daughter, took it from me. I'd no idea what an awful thing they planned—believe me, Hammond!"

My father caught his breath, stiffened, waited.

"You can't understand how desperate they are, how bitter," came Trent's hoarse voice. "The religious outrage, you know. And then the Falling Sickness . . . it would have wiped them out in fifty years, anyhow."

My father gulped.

"My God, Trent!" His voice trembled. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"They're going to load the Station with sunstone." Trent's red, hollow eyes stared unseeingly. "Four thousand tons of pure energy. Then sink it into the photosphere as far as the screens will hold." His dead flat voice had no emphasis, as if his feeling were already killed. "And then blow it up."

Soundlessly, my father's lips whispered, "What then?"

"A new focus of disintegration, like that at the center of the Sun. A wave of matter-annihilating concussion. It will blow out, of course. Rip a hole in the photosphere. Expansion will kill it. Not that that matters."

My father was staring stupidly.

"A minor nova outburst," Trent amplified. "A quite insignificant flash among the stars. The safety mechanism of the Sun will adjust itself. Its radiation, within a week, will be back to normal.

"But that shell of flaming gas will sweep all the planets, out to Jupiter."

"Old Anak!" whispered my father. "What was it he said? 'Judgment of the Sun!'"

And he burst suddenly into a roar of senseless laughter.

V

Any other man would have been unnerved by Trent's revelation. Even the vague rumors that escaped a hurriedly applied censorship were enough to throw the world into panic. But Garth Hammond, when he had time to recover from the impact, displayed a curious equanimity.

Would it be possible to reach the Sun before the explosion?

"Possible, yes," said Trent. "Possibly the *Redlance* could do it, though she's crippled. I don't know. But why?"

Could any attack hope for success?

Trent shook his haggard head.

"I know the reputation of your Sun Patrol, Hammond," he said. "I know your men would give their lives. And, given time, we could rig part of your fleet with shields for flight into the Sun. But it's no use."

He shrugged hopelessly.

"Don't think of force. The Station is invincible. There's no weapon that could even match the beating it is always getting from the Sun. We tricked Cornwall. We'd never have gotten aboard if he hadn't thought there were friends on the *Solarion*.

"But Anak has no friends."

Well, if they couldn't get aboard, could they get even into telephone contact with the Station?

"Just possible," Trent admitted. "But that means a very close approach, even with a tight cosmo-beam. But what arguments would you use on Anak? What could you promise him, when his very race is doomed? No, Hammond, it's no use," Trent insisted bitterly. "Unless we send a ship or two out beyond Jupiter. So, a few might survive—"

"No, Trent," my father said abruptly. "We're going to the Sun."

I would gladly have given my right hand to go with the *Redlance,* for it seemed that the expedition would probably be the last and most dramatic event in human history. But my father gruffly told me to go back to mother and wait with her.

Hurt—it is queer how one could nurse an injured private vanity while such great things were at stake—I returned to the marble villa on the Aegean. The wild rumors of doom had reached my mother. She

was pathetically glad to see me. She asked many questions about my father, whom she had not seen since I was a tiny child. I knew that she loved him still.

For weary weeks, we waited. A trip by sail, down among the Cyclades, failed to ease the suspense. My mother fell ill with the strain—and I feared, for a dreadful hour, that she was a victim of the Falling Sickness then raging through the islands.

No word came back from the *Redlance*. But fevered imagination pictured the details of the desperate voyage. The battered red hull shielded in the silver fog of deflection fields. The plunge into the Sun's fiery ocean. The frightful dive in quest of the Station, menaced with an intensity of heat beyond conception, battered with incredible storms, crushed with the pressure of a gravitation twenty-eight times that of Earth.

It was a period of sunspot maxima. Magnetic storms disturbed communication. One night was splendid with the cold flames of the aurora. I remember looking at the Sun through a dark glass, its round face pocked with a dozen angry vortices, each large enough to swallow an Earth. Dazzled, I went back to my mother, shuddering. If the power of the Sun could do all these things across 93,000,000 miles, what could it not do to men in its very flaming grasp?

To quiet the rumors, desperate officials had finally announced the truth. Depression and despair ruled the Earth. As if it fed on fear, a fresh epidemic spread, until it seemed that the Falling Sickness raced with astronomical cataclysm to wipe out mankind.

Then, to a stunned and incredulous planet, came the brief heliographic dispatch picked up and relayed from the colony on the Moon:

TO EARTH:

DANGER ENDED. ANAK SURRENDERED STATION INTACT. SPC RECOGNIZES INDEPENDENCE OF MARS. ANAK WILL BE RESTORED. STATION BACK IN OPERATION. REDLANCE BRINGING SUNSTONE TO EARTH.

GARTH HAMMOND

That was too good to believe. Many of us refused to believe it—until the *Redlance* landed on Long Island, thirty hours later. Trent left my father and two thousand tons of sunstone, and went on to carry Anak back to Mars.

But why had Anak, so grimly bent upon revenge—why had he surrendered?

My father himself brought the answer to that. His private stratoplane landed unwarned in the lee of our island, and taxied shoreward. Garth Hammond leaped out and waded up the beach. The ruggedly handsome face beneath his thick white hair was smiling gayly as ever, but his gray eyes held a wistful tenderness that I had never seen.

I ran to meet him, shouting incoherent questions.

"Run this." He thrust a visivox spool into my hand. "Where's your mother, Chan?"

I pointed, wondering briefly at the husky catch in his voice, and then ran to put the spool on a machine. The bright screen showed the *Redlance* landing, and then my father speaking to the tremendous crowd on the field in his old grand manner.

"You wonder, perhaps, why Anak gave up his frightful plan and surrendered?"

He paused for silence and effect.

"It is because I traded him something. For the Station, I traded him life. And the life of his race. The life of Mars! And I bring the same boon, a free gift to you and to all the Earth."

Another dramatic halt.

"I have conquered the Falling Sickness." There was a sound like a sob from all that multitude. A burst of clapping, quickly hushed. A breathless quiet. "It was the cure for that disease that I gave Anak and his men. And that I give the Earth."

There was an utter, queerly painful stillness. A great choking lump rose in my own throat. My father, on that tiny screen, made an oddly diffident little smile.

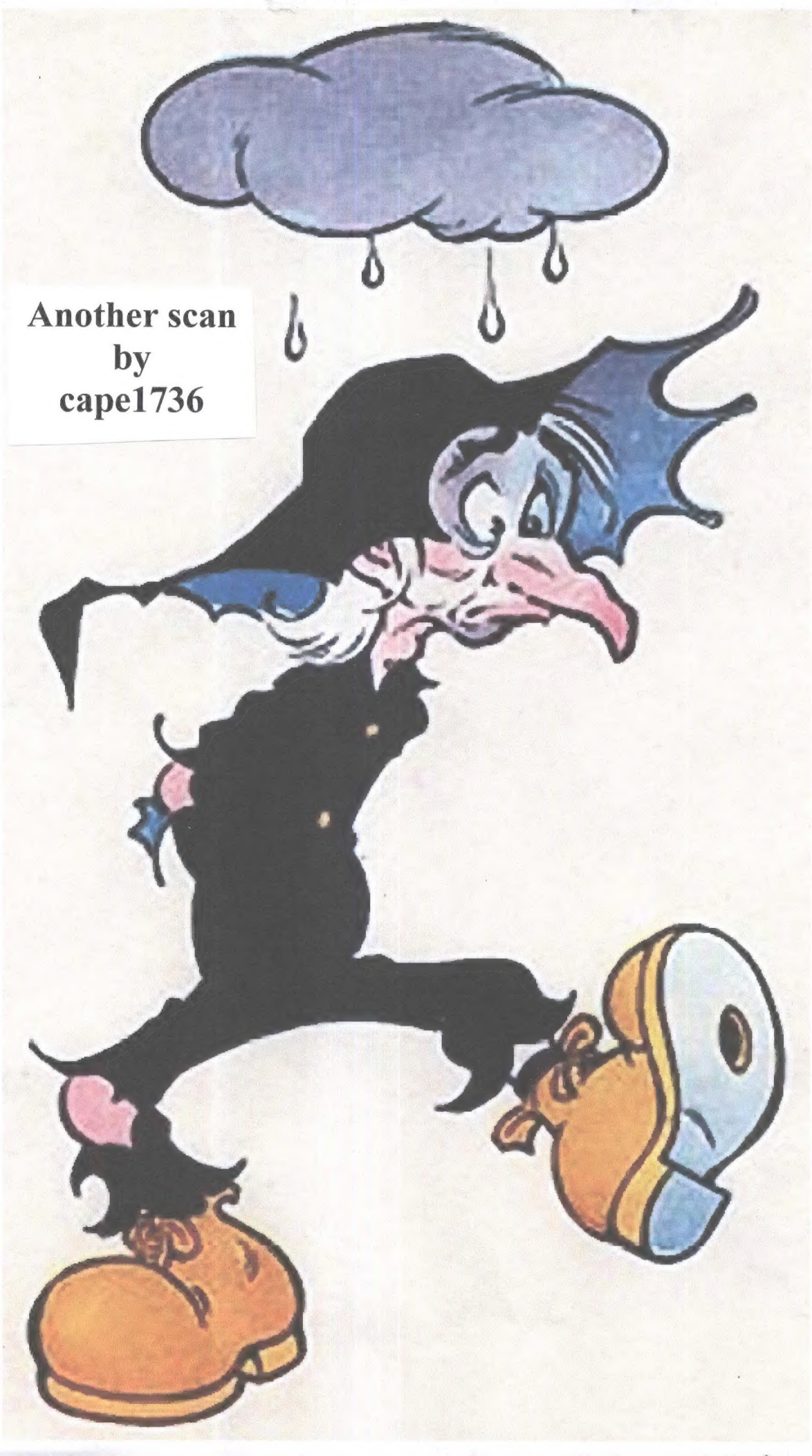
"I mean it," he said. "Free clinics will be opened at once by the Hammond Foundation. A harmless chemical renders the body proteins insensitive to the virus. Immunization is complete. There will be no more Falling Sickness!"

I found my father and my mother sitting side by side in her quiet, fragrant room. Her face was stained with tears, and her smile was very happy. My father had been telling her what I had learned from the spool. His great laugh boomed out softly.

"Funny thing!" he told her. "That chemical was formed in an old

bottle of the Lunar Oil. The cheap, impure stuff we used at the last. I happened to hold it against the light, and saw the change in color. When I analyzed it—"

I turned back, silently, and left them alone.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